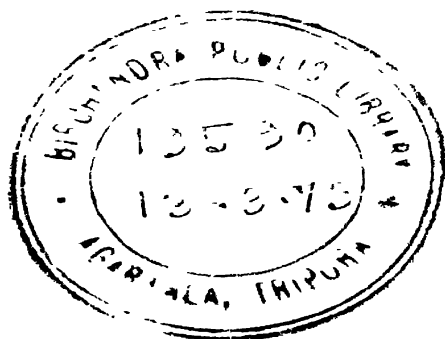


GANADEVATA

(The Temple Pavilion)

TARASANKAR BANERJEE
translated by Lila Ray



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Chapter 1

THE occasion of the quarrel was trivial. The damage done was immense. Aniruddha Karmakar, the blacksmith, and Girish Sutradhar, the carpenter, set up shop in the market town across the river. They left the village early in the morning and returned as late as ten o'clock at night. The village people were greatly inconvenienced. They alone knew to how much trouble they had been put to get their ploughshares sharpened and cart wheels rimmed during the ploughing season that year. The stumps of thorn trees they had left at the carpenter's house the preceding spring still lay in his courtyard. He had not made new ploughs for them.

Aniruddha and Girish were regarded with a great deal of dissatisfaction. During the ploughing and sowing seasons however everyone was too busy to make trouble. The smith and the carpenter were wheedled and coaxed into attending to the villagers' work. People rose before daybreak and went to the smith's house, refusing to leave his doorstep until he had done what was required. When their work was very urgent they carried their ploughs and rolled their cartwheels to his smithy in the town. It was a distance of less than four miles but the crossing of the Mayurakshi River made it seem nearly forty. During the monsoon when the river was full the ferry boat took an hour and a half to reach the other side. In the dry season it was not an easy matter to push cart wheels through half a mile of soft sand. There was a railway bridge a short distance away, but the road beside it was so high and narrow it was difficult to keep the cart wheels from rolling off.

The ploughing and sowing were now over. The grain had begun to ripen. Sickles were needed. Old sickles had to be sharpened and new sickles made. The smith had always done this for them: they provided the iron and steel. The carpenter made wooden handles. This year the smith and the carpenter continued to

ignore them. Anyone lucky enough to be able to persuade Aniruddha to do anything was sure to come to grief at Girish's hands. At last the villagers decided to refer the matter to the Council of Five. The people of the neighbouring village joined them, a day was set, and the smith and the carpenter summoned. The Council was held in the pavilion in front of the Siva temple where everybody could attend it. The pavilion was common property. The shrine was occupied by Siva as the Lord of Mayura. The altar of the presiding spirit of the village, Bhanga Kali, stood on one side of the pavilion. Every time a chapel had been constructed over the altar it had fallen down. The goddess was, for this reason, called Bhanga, the broken one. The pavilion itself was an old one. The wooden beams and eaves had been carefully carved with heads of elephants, six-petalled lotuses and other sacred objects in an attempt to make them last forever. The floor was the traditional clay. Mats, rugs and sacking were spread for the meeting of the Council. Members took their seats upon it.

Girish and Aniruddha could not stay away. They appeared together. All the prominent men of the two villages concerned were present: Harish Mandal, Bhabesh Pal, Mukunda Ghosh, Kirtibas Mandal, Natbar Pal. They were prosperous farmers of the Sadgop caste, men of standing and influence. Dwarka Chaudhury came from the neighbouring village. Chaudhury was distinguished, elderly and much esteemed in this part of the country. He was known for his sense of justice and his polished manners. People still recalled that he was the descendant of a once-noble family. Both these villages had at one time belonged to zemindars who were his forefathers. Now, of course, he was only one of the more prosperous farmers. Brindaban Dutta, the grocer, was also a person of consequence. Young farmers in middling circumstances were also present: Gopen Pal, Rakhal Mandal, Ramnarayan Ghosh and others. The only Brahmin resident of the village, Harendra Ghosal, sat a little apart with two Brahmins from the other village, Nishi Mukherjee and Pyari Banerjee.

Chiru Pal had made a place for himself right in the centre of the assembly. Chiru, otherwise known as Srihari, was a rich newcomer to the village. People guessed he was as rich as anyone in the neighbourhood. He was an extraordinarily large man and also formidably mean and cunning by nature. For this reason he was not accorded the degree of respect usually shown to wealth. People despised him although they feared him. He was coarse, quarrelsome, intractable and devoid of character. Chiru was mortified by their disregard and showed his resentment in the irritation with which he treated everybody. He was

determined to force his way into an influential social position. He always pushed to the front of any public gathering.

Standing with his back to a pillar on one side was a tall, strongly-built young man with a dark complexion. He appeared to be quite detached and unconcerned. This was Debnath Ghosh, the son of a Sadgop farmer. Debnath taught in the free primary school maintained by the local Union Board and did not work on the land any more. He had not particularly wanted to come. He knew why Aniruddha had done what he did. His lack of interest in the proceedings was due to his lack of confidence in any meeting at which a man like Chiru was allowed to take a prominent position. He leaned against the pillar in silent contempt. The only people of importance who were not present were Helaram Chakravarty, the adopted son of the miserly money-lender, the late Rakhohari Chakravarty, and the village doctor, Jagganath Ghosh. Even the watchman, Bhupal Lohar, was there. Children were running noisily about. People belonging to untouchable castes stood at a respectful distance. It was they who worked in the fields as day labourers and were therefore the most inconvenienced by what had happened.

Aniruddha and Girish took their places. The neatness of their appearance and the cleanliness of their clothes plainly showed the influence of town fashions. They were both smoking cigarettes when they arrived but they threw them away before entering the pavilion.

Aniruddha was the first to speak. No sooner was he seated than he rubbed his face with his hands and said, "Now then, gentlemen, tell us what it is you wish to say. We work for our living. Coming here is costing us half a day."

His manner of speaking and tone of voice surprised every one a little. The elders cleared their throats energetically. The younger murmured.

"Why did you come then," demanded Chiru, alias Srihari, "if you consider the time wasted?"

Harendra Ghosal was fidgeting with excitement. "You can leave right now if you want to," he cried. "Nobody forced you to come and nobody will force you to stay."

Harish Mandal intervened, "Be quiet, both of you. Aniruddha and Girish were requested to be present at this meeting. They had to come. It's good that you have come, Aniruddha, it's fine, it's excellent! Both parties to the dispute will be given a hearing. We shall say what we have to say and you will answer. Then the case will be decided. This can't be done in a hurry, can it?"

"Then what you wish to say has reference to us?" asked Girish.

"That is what we surmised," added Aniruddha. "Now please tell us what's the matter. We will answer your questions. But who is to decide the case? You all seem to have sided against us. How can a complainant also judge? We do not understand."

Dwarka Chaudhury cleared his throat noisily to indicate he was about to speak. Everyone looked at him. His appearance differed from the others. The gentleness of his manner, his fair complexion and white moustache, showed his breeding.

"Karmakar," he said at last, "please excuse me for what I am going to say. The tone you have taken from the outset leads me to think that you may have come here prepared to quarrel. That is not a good way to begin a meeting of this kind, son. Sit down and compose yourself."

Aniruddha bowed his head respectfully and answered, "Very well. Now please tell us what the charges against us are."

"I'll be brief," Harish Mandal began. "To explain at length would take nothing short of an epic. You two have started doing business in the town. That's very good. It's natural enough for men to go where they can earn best. But you have stopped doing any work in the village. We have to carry our tools and push our cart wheels across the river into the town when they need repair. How can we put up with this state of things? This year you have certainly given us a great deal of trouble. Try to realise that."

"It's a little inconvenient for you, I admit," answered Aniruddha.

"A little?" Chiru, alias Srihari, was fuming. "What do you mean? A little? Do you know ploughing was held up after water had come into the fields because the ploughshares weren't sharpened on time? You also have some land. Go and take a look at it! See how fine the grass is growing! The ploughs were so blunt not a root of grass came out! When the harvest is brought in, you two turn up on time, bringing your sacks for your share of the grain. What do you do in return for it? Nothing but sit in the town! Can it be allowed?"

"That's it," Harendra seconded him.

"That's it," the others chorused.

The elders nodded in agreement.

Aniruddha straightened up brightly. "This is your complaint? Now please listen to what we have to say," he answered, "we sharpen your ploughshares, put rims on your cart wheels, forge sickles for you and whet them. You give us five small measures of rice per plough. Our carpenter Girish Sutradhar. . ."

Chiru Pal interrupted him rudely. "That's Girish's affair. What does it have to do with you?"

Chiru did not finish. Dwarka Chaudhury intervened. "My dear Srihari," he said, "Aniruddha has not said anything wrong. He speaks for both of them. There's no harm in that."

Chiru said nothing. Aniruddha, encouraged, said, "It takes Chaudhury Mashay to say the right thing. What would the meeting be without him?"

"Go on, Aniruddha, what were you saying?"

"Yes, your honour. Five small measures of rice per plough is the price I am paid for my whole year's labour. The carpenter gets only four. We have worked for you on these terms till now. Chaudhury Mashay, I am obliged to state that we are not paid even this amount in full."

"You're not paid?"

"No, your honour," Girish asserted, "nearly everyone owes us three or four measures of rice. We're told we'll be paid a few days later or next year. We never get it!"

"You don't get it, eh?" hissed Chiru, snake-like. "Who hasn't paid you? Name him! You can't just say you haven't been paid. Tell us. Who owes you? How much?"

"Who owes me? You want names, do you?" Aniruddha turned round and flashed at Chiru with wild fury, "Very well. *You* owe me."

"I do?"

"Yes, you. Have you paid me any grain at all the past two years?"

"And you owe me money! I have your handnote. How much of the loan have *you* repaid? How dare you say here in front of everybody that I haven't given you your grain?"

"There is such a thing as accounting, isn't there? Isn't the price of grain entered on the back of a handnote and deducted from a loan? Chaudhury Mashay, please tell us. Aren't accounts kept and adjusted this way? Mandal Mashay is also present. He can tell us too."

"Hear me! Be quiet, you two" Chaudhury said. "Srihari, make a note of the grain you owe him on the back of the handnote and deduct it from his debt. And you, Aniruddha, draw up a list of what is owing to you. Give the list to Harish Mandal Mashay. There's no point in making trouble over this in this meeting. Every one will pay you your dues in full. You, for your part, ought to keep at least a small smithy open in the village and work for us as before, Aniruddha."

The proposal was unanimously approved. Girish and Aniruddha said nothing. It was impossible to tell from their faces or manner whether they agreed or not.

Debnath spoke for the first time. Old Chaudhury's proposal appealed to him. He had known that Aniruddha and Girish were not paid properly and had felt an injustice was being done to them. Ordinarily he was in favour of preserving the peace and quiet of village life. Debu was particularly pleased that Chaudhury had, in making this proposal, snubbed Chiru and reproved his dishonesty. It seemed to him that Aniruddha and Girish should submit gratefully. "Ani Bhai," he said, "you ought not to raise any objections."

"Aniruddha?" Chaudhury asked.

"Yes, your honour."

"What do you have to say?"

Aniruddha pressed the palms of his hands together and lifted them respectfully. "Kindly excuse us, your Honour. We cannot do it."

A murmur of displeasure rose from the assembly.

"Why not?"

"What's the reason?"

"You can't get out of it!"

"Are you trying to be clever?"

"Don't you live in the village?"

Chaudhury raised his arm for silence. "Silence!" he said, "wait a minute."

Harish expostulated loudly. "Stop! Stop! Heh, you young fellows! We aren't dead yet!"

"Silence! Silence!" shouted Harendra Ghosal. He was young and had passed the matriculation examination. He waved his arms.

At last old Dwarka Chaudhury rose to his feet. An effect was produced. "Shouting doesn't help," he said quietly. "Let the blacksmith speak. He'll explain why he can't accept the proposal."

The meeting grew quiet. Chaudhury sat down again. "Karmakar," he said, "tell us, son, why the proposal doesn't satisfy you. You can't just refuse, you know. Your family has done our work for several generations. What will the village do if you refuse?"

"Unfair," said Debnath. "Aniruddha and Girish are being unfair."

"Your forefathers lived in Mahagram," said Harish. "There was no blacksmith in this village. Your great grandfather was invited to come and live here. You know all that, son. How can you refuse us now?"

"Then hear me, your honour, Uncle," said Aniruddha, "Chaudhury Mashay, you be the judge. How many ploughs are there in the village today? How many ploughs were there? How

many families have given up ploughing? Godai, Srinivas, Mahendra! Eleven families have abandoned their ploughs in my time. I've counted them. Their lands have passed into the hands of the gentlemen of Konkona. Konkona has its own blacksmith. I receive that much less grain. Then consider. During the ploughing season we made and repaired ploughs, put iron rims on cart wheels and at other times we worked on house construction. We made nails, bolts, screws, chains, pins, knives, kitchen utensils, spades, mattocks and so on. The villagers bought what they required from us. Now they prefer to buy from the town market. The market products are cheaper. Girish used to make carts, doors, windows. Whenever a house needed a new roof he was called to make the frame. Now people bring workmen from outside who do the work more cheaply. Remember also that the price of rice has gone up. It now costs between one rupee four annas and one rupee eight annas a kilogram. The price of everything else has gone up too. How can I provide for my family if I sit back and do nothing in a situation like this? Tell me! I am a married man. And our way of life is changing. . . ."

Chiru seized the opportunity to interrupt angrily. "Of course! Of course!" he cried. "You have to have shiny patent leather pumps, long tunics, and cigarettes! Your wife wants petticoats and bodices. . . ."

"Chiru Moru!" Aniruddha warned. "You're accountable for what you say!"

Chiru rocked back and forth scornfully. "My accounts are all right. Twenty-five rupees nine annas and three pice. The original loan was ten rupees. Interest comes to fifteen rupees nine annas and three pice. Figure it out yourself! Can you calculate compound interest?"

Aniruddha's handnote! Aniruddha looked at the gentlemen present, turning from one to the other. This uncalled-for rudeness in a public meeting had shocked them all. Aniruddha stood up.

"Where're you going?" Chiru demanded.

Aniruddha ignoring him, walked out of the meeting.

"Srihari . . . " old Chaudhury was provoked.

"Don't try to stare me down, Chaudhury Mashay," Chiru said. "You've stopped me two or three times already. I've put up with it. But I'm not going to submit any longer."

Old Chaudhury took up his shawl and rose. "Kindly excuse me," he said, grasping his bamboo cane, "I must go. My pranams to the Brahmins present. To everyone else my namashkar."

The village cobbler, Patulal Muehi, came forward and addressed him. "Chaudhury Mashay," he pleaded, "please hear me before you go." Chaudhury had begun to make his way carefully out of the assembly. "What is it, Patu?" His voice was kind. "Speak up, son. Everyone is here."

"Chaudhury Mashay!"

Chaudhury looked in the direction of the speaker. Aniruddha had returned.

"Please take your seat again, Chaudhury Mashay! I've brought Chiru Pal's money. Kindly ask him to give me my handnote in your presence."

The assembly stirred. Hands were held out to help old Chaudhury back to his place. But he was not to be deterred. He went slowly out.

Aniruddha placed the money—twenty-five rupees ten annas—before the assembly and said, "Give me my handnote, Chiru Pal."

When the handnote had been restored to him he said nonchalantly, "You need not give me the change! Buy yourself a betelnut with it. Come on, Girish, come on."

"Are you two leaving?" asked Harish. "The purpose of the meeting . . ."

"Yes," answered Aniruddha, "we're leaving. We cannot work for you any more, Mashay. And any proposal put forward by a Council which cannot restrain Chiru Morul is worthless."

Aniruddha and Girish walked briskly away.

Early the following morning it became known that Aniruddha's bakhari rice which had begun to turn yellow and was nearly ready for harvesting, had been cut during the night and completely removed from his fields.

Chapter 2

ANIRUDDHA stood on the edge of his fields and stared at the bare ground for a long time. The muscles in his arms, hardened at the anvil, stood out sharply as his fists opened and closed like a vise in helpless fury. He went home, walking rapidly, slipped his short-sleeved tunic over his head and turned to go out.

His wife, Padma Mani, moved swiftly to the door and blocked his way. Padma was a tall, dark-skinned woman in the full flush of youth. Her nose was straight and high, her eyes large and vivacious. She worked from dawn to dusk and her body was unusually strong. Though she was not beautiful she had a pleasant presence and grace of movement. And she was sharp-witted in practical matters.

"Where are you going?" she asked, noting the irate manner in which her husband was preparing to leave.

"Why do you hop around after me?" Aniruddha gave her an angry look. "What's it to you where I go?"

Padma smiled. "I'm not following you around," she said, "I'm standing right here in front of you. And I must certainly know where you're going. What if you get into a fight?"

"I'm going to the police station. Get out of my way. I'm not going to get mixed up in any fight." Aniruddha answered.

"The police station?" Padma's voice betrayed her alarm.

"Yes, the police station. I'm going to lodge a complaint against that rascally peasant, Chiru!" Aniruddha's voice rasped with irritation.

"No," Padma shook her head quietly. "It may be true that Chiru has stolen our grain. But who will believe it around here?"

Aniruddha was in no mood to listen to such advice. He pushed Padma aside and started towards the door.

Aniruddha's surmise was absolutely correct. His rice had been stolen by Srihari.

But what Padma said was also cruelly true. It is no easy matter to prove that a rich man is a thief. Srihari was rich.

Chiru Pal, alias Srihari Pal, was known to be rich, in his own village and in the two neighbouring ones. Kalipur and Sivpur were actually a single village although they were entered separately in the official records and belonged to different districts. There was only a pond between them. Srihari lived on this side of it, in Kalipur. He was the richest man in both places. Hela Chatterji of Sivpur had a lot of money and a lot of grain but people said that Srihari kept gold bricks in his house as well as grain and cash. The third village, Konkona, was two miles away. It was prosperous and growing. Many aristocratic Brahmin families lived there. The Mukherjees of Konkona were worth lakhs. Nearly every village in this part of the country was in their possession. They had become powerful and influential zemindars after having made a fortune by moneylending. Kalipur and Sivpur were both being slowly drawn into their sphere of influence by their long, reptilian tongues. But Srihari was well known even in Konkona. And he was known and respected also in the market town across the river, at the railway junction. Ten or

twelve rice mills had sprung up there, several oil mills and a flour mill. Rich Marwari merchants had opened warehouses. The police station was situated in the town.

Padma was right. No one either in the town or in Konkona would easily believe that Srihari was a thief. But no one in Sivpur or Kalipur would doubt it. Chiru was known as a man to be feared. There was nothing he could not or would not do. He had not stolen Aniruddha's rice only for revenge. He wanted the grain. Every child in Kalipur and Sivpur knew it, but nobody had the courage to say so.

Srihari was a huge man. His body was not flaccid; the muscles were hard and strong. There was not an ounce of extra fat on his bones which were hard and knobbly like bamboos. His broad hands were big, his head enormous, his eyes prominent. The wide pouch of his mouth stretched from ear to ear. His shaggy hair was an unkempt mass of tight curls. Srihari could move both swiftly and noiselessly in spite of his large size. He was capable of cutting a clump of bamboos belonging to a neighbour in one night and carrying them to his own pond. Or he stocked his pond with fish netted at night from somebody else's lake. During the rainy season he knocked down the walls of his courtyard every year and extended his premises when he rebuilt them by encroaching upon the road or adjoining land. Nobody bothered about it much until their own land was involved. At such times Srihari rose to his full height and raised his mattock. What he said was unintelligible, for he mumbled his words toothlessly, but his voice was like the roaring of a wild beast. He had lost all his teeth at the age of forty-four as the result of venereal disease. In the evenings when the men were stupefied with drink, Srihari slipped silently into the houses of untouchables in search of prey. They had often chased him out and tried to catch him. But Chiru disappeared in the darkness like a fierce night-prowling animal. Such was Chiru Pal, also known as Srihari Ghosh!

Aniruddha brushed his wife aside and came out into the road. He paid no heed to her words of caution, even though he knew as well as any what kind of a man Chiru Pal was. Padma was intelligent. She did not get angry or allow herself to feel hurt. She called him.

"My dear!" She gave a faint smile. "Listen to me. Come back. I'm calling you back. Listen!"

Aniruddha whirled around like a cobra caught under a plough. He was furious.

"Eat something before you go," Padma smiled.

Aniruddha came back into the house and slapped her sharply on the cheek. "Never call me back again!" he shouted.

Aniruddha did not re-enter the house. Padma might try to stop him again. He walked along beside the doctor's bicycle, calling to Girish as he went, "Bring the key with you!"

He was referring to the key to the smithy in the market town across the river. Girish did not have to ask for it. It dropped at his feet. Padma had thrown it from behind the door. She peeked around the door as he stooped to pick it up.

Aniruddha and the doctor were already quite far away. Drawing her veil over her face she went up to Girish and said, "Call him back!"

Girish straightened up and looked first at Padma and then at Aniruddha. "He'll be angry if I call him from behind," he said.

"What about his lunch?" Padma asked. "Who will take it to him? Won't he get hungry?"

Girish and Aniruddha ordinarily left the village early in the morning, taking their lunch with them. They spent the whole day in town, coming home at night for their suppers. "Give it to me," said Girish, "I'll take it to him."

Padma had been alone in the house since her mother-in-law had died several years ago. She had no children. Women who find themselves in such circumstances in the village usually pass part of their time pleasantly enough visiting their neighbours. But Padma was home-loving by nature. She clung to her house like a spider to its web, working happily all day long. She spread grain in the sun to dry, gathered it up again, took out the quilts they would need in the winter and patched them neatly, cleaned the cowshed and the place beside the pond where the dishes were washed, cut fodder, laid out cow-dung chips to dry and swept the house thoroughly three or four times a day. She even built a small altar with clay and bricks which she had found lying about.

That day Padma did not feel like doing anything. She went to the pond at the back of the house and sat down on the bank. If she had tried to placate Aniruddha with her smiles, and dissuade him from going to the police it was only to forestall future trouble. The loss of the grain grieved her. She began to curse Chiru Pal to herself, in a low voice.

"Strike him blind! Strike him blind! He'll lose his eyes! His hands will turn leprous! He'll lose all he has and beg for a living!"

Loud voices attracted her attention. Somewhere people were shouting. Padma listened. The trouble seemed to be in the houses of the Bayens, leather workers who are cobblers and drummers. A man was bellowing abusively, in a harsh voice.

The contagion apparently touched Padma. She raised her own voice and resumed her vituperation shrilly, for all the village to hear.

"His pair of sons will die in the same bed, together, writhing in agony! The rice from my fields will bring cholera! He'll be heirless! Heirless! He himself won't die: he'll go blind! His hands will grow leprous! All he has will be burnt away—blown away! He'll wander up and down the roads, begging!"

She chose curses that fitted Chiru Pal though she carefully avoided mentioning any name. Suddenly she caught sight of him. He was standing on the other side of the pond, laughing. Her curses amused him. Chiru had just given Patu, the Bayen, a good beating. He had been the cause of the outcry. On the way back he had heard Padma's imprecations and stopped to listen to her. He enjoyed them. His smile was malevolent and scoffing. Padma rose and went into the house. Chiru thought of crossing over and forcing his way in, but it was daytime and he was not fond of the light. Though his breast was throbbing fiercely, he hesitated. The sound of Padma's voice again made him look back. Light glittered on something she held in her hands. "What a lot of work the man has made for me!" Padma was saying. "He cut the heads off two goats this morning with a single stroke of this knife just to test its sharpness! And he had no time to clean up the blood! The house is full of it. And of course I am the one who has to mop it up!" A large curved knife flashed in the sunlight. Chiru Pal turned his eyes away and strode heavily off in the direction of his house. The smile on Padma's face was taunting and cruel.

Chapter 4

FIVE villages clustered around a plain nearly four miles wide and six miles long; Konkona, Kusumpur, Mahagram, Sivkalipur and Dekhuria. On the south the plain was bounded by the Mayurakshi River which flowed from east to west. The fertility of this broad plain, lying along the river, was well above the average. The best part, Amarkunda, was on the outskirts of Sivkalipur. Not much of the land on this side belonged to Sivpur. Most of its land lay on the north. Kalipur's cultivable

land was on the south and east. Sivpur and Kalipur, nominally separate villages, were often referred to as one, Sivkalipur. Kalipur was the larger. It was the home of Srihari, Debu and many others.

Eighty or ninety years before Sivpur had not been more than a small collection of cottages. A sect known as the Devals lived there. Though farmers, they had not worked on the land themselves. They had acted as priests and caretakers at the shrine of Siva in Kalipur. But they were no longer there. The few who had not died had migrated elsewhere. Their descendants were living with other Devals in two villages quite far away, Raksheswar being twenty miles and Jaleswar sixteen miles away. There they continued to earn their living as priests and caretakers at temples and shrines dedicated to Siva. Sivpur derived its name from the fact that they used to live there. When they left, the Chaudhury family bought it and began to live there themselves, to avoid the proximity of impoverished relatives. The Chaudhurys had made Sivpur a different district for revenue purposes. With the decline of the family, Sivpur had begun to stagnate once more.

The village elders said the goddess of plenty, Lakshmi, shunned the lands north and west of the plain though she bestowed her favours copiously upon the lands to the south and east. The lands on the north and west were higher than the villages, and the plain sloped gently down towards the east and west. The fields on this side were therefore well-watered. It was easy to utilise the ponds, and the land also benefitted from the water that drained out of the villages. It was for this reason that the lands belonging to Sivpur and Kalipur differed so much in value and fertility, although the villages lay side by side. The people of Sivpur had to put up with a great deal of arrogance from the people of Kalipur, who were retaliating for the arrogance Sivpur had shown at the time the Chaudhurys owned it.

Dwarka Chaudhury belonged to the Chaudhury family. A distinguished one, it had begun to decline a generation before his birth. Dwarka Chaudhury made no claims to nobility of lineage. He lived among the farmers as one of them, chatting with them, smoking with them, listening to their tales of woe. Yet, there was a distinction in the tone of his voice and manner of speaking. He spoke little; his words were soft and his manner slow. He never argued or quarreled. On occasion he would acknowledge the rightness of his opponent briefly, fall silent, or get up and leave a gathering. Old Chaudhury was living out his life quietly, adjusting to changing circumstances.

This morning Dwarka Chaudhury was on his way to inspect the winter crops in the fields beside the river, on the south of

Kalipur. He carried a bamboo cane and held an umbrella over his head. He still had a large holding in Kalipur, although his family no longer owned the whole of it. Amarkunda belonged to him. In Amarkunda crops never withered or died, and the ground never dried out. Two pools at the head of the field were fed by perennial streams.

The winter rice had begun to ripen as soon as it began to grow cold. The crop was abundant. The green and yellow of the grain was a beautiful sight, stretching across the plain from Amarkunda at one end to the lap of the river dyke at the other. The ridges dividing the fields were hidden. Only the heads of the palm trees, which lined the twisting course of the streams' channels, rose above it. In the glow of the yellow autumn light the fields shone. The sky which had not yet lost its blueness, would later be obscured by dust. A long green wall of reeds ran along the distant dyke where the fields came to end, and the white plumes of flowering grasses crowned it like a whitewashed cornice.

Konkona, the richest of the five villages, lay to the west of Kalipur. The white and red and yellow of its houses rose above the greenery. The school, the hospital and the theatre which could be seen clearly, stood in an open space. A tax of one pice in every rupee for all money transactions payable both by those who paid money and those who received it, had been introduced by the gentlemen of Konkona to raise funds for theatrical performances. Chaudhury sighed. The tax cost him some two rupees a year. There was plenty of water in the fields of Amarkunda and the water was full of fish, which the women of the Bayen, Bauri, Hari and Dom castes caught by cutting ridges between the fields and setting baskets in the openings. Only a moving line betrayed the presence of a fish passing through the stalks of the grain, like the line left by a fish darting through shallow water. People were cutting grass and tending cows. Some earned a few pice from the sale of the grass.

A ridge broad enough to be used as a path ran down the middle of Amarkunda. One person could walk on it easily but two could walk abreast only with difficulty. Cattle, muzzled with rope to prevent them from browsing on the grain, were driven down it to the river. Old Chaudhury sighed despairingly. There was no place left where the poor beasts could graze.

The planting of the winter crops was in progress beyond the dyke, on the sand banks thrown up by the river. More than half of Amarkunda was now in the hands of Konkona families. The farmers had no choice. They were forced to make use of the sandy stretches in the river bed which had formerly been winter pastures. Many farmers had no land left at all. They had been

the first to begin the planting. Others had followed their example. The sand banks were, of course, extremely fertile. The water of the river rose during the rainy season and submerged them for several months. Silt deposited by the river formed the banks. It was rich as gold, a gold that mounted the stalks of the grain and crowned the crops with glory. Wheat and mustard grew abundantly, chhola the best of all. This particular sand bank derived its name from the chhola that grew there; it was called Chhola Kuri. At this time of the year it was the custom to plant potatoes. The potatoes were big, the yield heavy and there was a ready market for them in the town. Wholesale merchants came from Calcutta to buy potatoes here. Some of them opened warehouses for several months. They paid cash for potatoes. The larger producers were even given an advance of between twenty and fifty rupees!

Chaudhury had been forced, like the others, to plant his pasture land with potatoes, wheat and gram. Cows cannot be put to graze in the midst of growing crops. The poor dumb creatures cannot be expected to understand. They might break loose and run into the fields at any moment! And, if it is impossible to graze cattle on a patch of land left open in the midst of cultivated fields, it is no less impossible to plant a field in the midst of a stretch of barren land. The Konkona gentlemen did not trouble themselves with winter crops. Neither did they wish to spend money on fertilisers. After the rice was harvested, their fields lay fallow. So it had become impossible to crop the doym land of Amarkunda. Goats and cattle could be kept out of it but men and monkeys were more difficult to deal with. They would devour everything! Kalipur's doym land was rich land!

What a war the English had fought with the Germans! Everything had been turned topsy-turvy. Even in the best of times there is some hardship, but times had never been so bad as since the war. Dhutis were six or seven rupees a pair. The price of medicine had shot up like a flame of fire. Even the price of needles and nails had quadrupled! The price of land had doubled. People, in their ignorance and poverty, had sold their land to the Konkona gentlemen. It did them little good to regret it now. The wretches would die! Ah! It was 1923. It was five years since the war had ended. Prices were still rising. The market had been set on fire then and was still burning. The Konkona gentlemen were selling handfuls of dust for the price of gold and making lakhs. And they were buying Kalipur's lands. Paying a good price for them too! The dust they dug out of the ground—what was it but dust? Coal! They were making their money from coal. Coal had sold for three annas fourteen pice a maund. Now it cost fourteen annas.

And the Council of Five had decided to enhance the taxes! On top of everything else! Like an abscess on a swollen limb! The Union Board! The new zemindars had put their own men on the Board and on the Council. They were the masters. Pay the taxes! The taxes were being collected with a flourish. Dugai Misri was going from house to house with the air of a governor, carrying his ledger under his arm! The village watchman and a constable trailed along behind him.

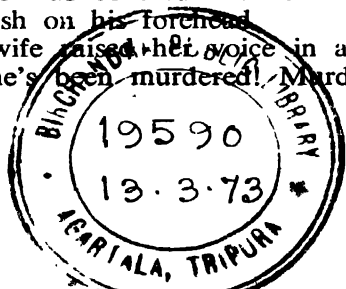
Old Chaudhury stopped suddenly. Wasn't someone crying? He tucked his cane under his arm and shaded his eyes with his hand as he looked first one way and then another. Yes, behind him. There. Several people were coming in his direction. One of them was crying. It was a woman. A man was in front and she could not be seen. "Ah—ah—ah!" she exclaimed as the man whipped around like a snake, seized the woman's hair and began to beat her. Chaudhury shouted from where he stood, "A—ee! A—ee! Ah—ah—ah! Oh—ee!"

Whether they heard him or not he did not know but the woman stopped crying and the man let go of her. Chaudhury stared at them for a few minutes and then went on his way. Such people were called low-caste with good reason, he thought. They didn't know how to behave. They'd never learn. Didn't the fellow know that to take a woman by the hair reduced his strength? Ravana was a king with ten heads and twenty arms, thousands of sons and hundreds of thousands of grandsons! Yet what had happened to him when he took Sita by the hair? His line was wiped out! Wiped out totally!

Chaudhury had almost reached the dyke when the sound of rapid steps behind him made him look round. The man had caught up with him. He was Patu the Bayen. Patu was walking with the doggedness of a disgruntled boar. Not far behind him came a woman, flinging herself forward as she ran. Perhaps she was Patu's wife. She was still crying softly, wiping her eyes from time to time. Chaudhury became concerned. Patu was advancing at a speed that made it necessary for him to move out of the way, for he could not possibly keep on walking in front of him. But Patu moved aside himself, stepping down into the fields to pass by. He abruptly turned round and bowed to the ground before Chaudhury, crying, "Look at me, Chaudhury Mashay, look at me!"

Chaudhury looked at him and shuddered at what he saw. Patu's face was covered with blood. Blood was flowing from a fresh gash on his forehead.

Patu's wife raised her voice in a wail at once, "Ogo, Babu Mashay, he's been murdered! Murder!"



"Ay—ah—o!" Patu shouted, "are you screaming again, you hag?"

Patu's wife lowered her voice instantly but continued wailing softly. "Just see how the poor are treated! Just see! Is it fair? Judge for yourself!"

Patu turned round and displayed his back. "Look! Look at my back!" he cried. The long rope marks that completely covered his back were welling with blood. He had been flogged mercilessly.

Chaudhury was deeply moved. Pity and compassion swept over him. "Ah—ah—ah! Who has done it, Patu?" he asked with emotion.

"Chiru Pal, Mashay." Patu went on without waiting to be questioned, "Not a word. No explanation. He came into the house, saw a bundle of rope lying in a corner and started beating me with it straight away!" Patu, in his hurt and anger, turned around to show his back to Chaudhury once more. "When I caught hold of the rope," he said as he turned to face him once more, "he hit me over the head with a couple of split bamboos."

Chiru Pal, Srihari Ghosh? There was no reason to disbelieve it. He had flogged Patu pitilessly. Tears filled Chaudhury's eyes. There are times when a person is so moved by another's misfortune, he forgets himself and feels the other's suffering as his own. Chaudhury looked at Patu with swimming eyes. His lips began to tremble.

"I've been to every important person in the village," Patu said. "Nobody had a word to say. Doors open only to the powerful."

"That blackfaced rascal—" Patu's wife wailed under her breath.

"Aya—ei! Aya—ei!" Patu stopped her. "Don't start that again."

"Why did he beat you?" asked Chaudhury, controlling himself with an effort. "What did you do that angered him?"

"I tried to tell you the other day at the temple pavilion but you did not listen to me. You got up and went away." Patu complained, "I have to supply everybody in the village with shoe leather the year round. Free. The blacksmith has refused to work for nothing. I made up my mind not to supply any more shoe leather free either. Yesterday evening Pal sent a man to me for his sandals. I told him to bring cash. That's all I did! This morning Pal comes around and does this to me!"

Chaudhury said nothing.

"No, no, Babu Mashay—" Patu's wife shook her head again and again as she wailed.

"How am I to live? Won't you tell me? Or am I only to be beaten?" Patu asked, silencing her.

Chaudhury coughed and cleared his throat. "In flogging you like this, Srihari has done wrong, very wrong. I'll repeat it a thousand times, ten thousand times. He's done wrong. It's true. But, Patu, you don't know about the shoe leather. The shoe leather is supplied in return for the right to the charnel field. This is the traditional arrangement. As a Bayen you get all the skins from carrion left in the charnel field. You sell the bones. The shoe leather is supplied against that." Chaudhury could not bring himself to mention the meat they also got. The thought of it revolted him.

"For the charnel field?" Patu was astonished.

"Yes," explained Chaudhury. "There're no elders among you any more. They knew."

"It's not only that, not only that . . ." Patu's wife raised her voice, "that shameless hussy . . ."

"Yes, Mashay," Patu admitted, "it's not only the shoe leather. What can we do if you gentlemen cast your eyes on our homes? Tell me?"

"Ram! Ram!" Chaudhury was shocked. "Radhakesta! Radhakesta!"

"No Ram! Ram! Chaudhury Mashay," Patu answered. "My sister Durga is a bit flighty, you know. She ran away from her husband. Chiru Pal insists on being friendly with her, Mashay. He always comes to our neighbourhood and finds excuses to drop in. You know what my wicked mother is like! She carries on just as she always has. She asks Pal to sit down and chats with him. My wife also lives in the house! I gave her a few blows, Mother too, and Durga. I told Pal not to come again, our caste people speak ill of us. I told him this very politely, Mashay. That's what he's so mad about, really."

Chaudhury's hands were occupied with his umbrella and his cane. He could not put his fingers in his ears. He turned his face away and spat with disgust. "Radhakrishna heh! Stop it, Patu! Stop it, son! Don't force me to listen to such things in the morning. What can I do about it? Radhe, Radhe, heh!"

Patu's hurt was rankling. He turned and walked on excitedly. His wife ran behind him. "That slut!" she wailed, taking advantage of her husband's silence. "She pretended to cry when her brother was beaten! What am I to do? What am I to do?" Patu flashed around and she subsided in terror.

"I haven't said anything to you, have I?" Patu ground his teeth. "What are you crying about?" Thrusting her aside he came back and stood in front of Chaudhury again. "Chaudhury Mashay," he said, "what are you doing about the charnel field?"

It's been leased out to Rahamat Shekh of Alepur by Ramanda Chatterjee of Konkona."

"How's that?" Chaudhury was surprised.

"Yes, Mashay. We cannot sell skins to anyone else. Shekh claims the zemindar has given him the exclusive right to them. He does not pay more than a few annas over and above the cost of salt and the charges for skinning. Yet the price of leather is very high now."

"Are you telling the truth, Patu?" asked Chaudhury, looking into his face.

"Yes, Mashay. If it isn't the truth I'll rub my nose in the dust and you can strike me fifty times with a shoe!"

"Then," Chaudhury shook his white head over and over again, "you have every right to ask for payment in cash. The village people are under an obligation to pay cash. But are you sure? Have you asked the zemindar's steward?"

"I'll go straight to the zemindar himself! Why should I go to the steward? Dr. Ghosh told me to go the police. I'll go to the zemindar first. Let me see what he has to say! He ought to do something about it!"

Patu walked quickly away, following a ridge in the fields that led in the direction of Konkona. Chaudhury tapped his cane as he went down to the sandy stretch of land in the river bed. The chimneys of the mills in the market town could now be plainly seen. Chaudhury had reached his destination. The old gentleman was much upset. Ramanda Chatterjee, a Brahmin's son, was making money out of carrion! How shameful!

Chapter 5

AN enquiry was held the very next day. Although Aniruddha had pointed out to the police the reason why he suspected Chiru Pal, the police searched the house of Satish Bauri, a field watchman, turned everything upside down and carried him off. They let him go after interrogating him for hours. A superficial inspection of Chiru Pal's granary yielded nothing. Not a straw of the grain cut from Aniruddha's fields was found.

The police made the temple pavilion the centre of their operations. The important people of the village gathered there, sitting around them like an array of planets. They whispered excitedly among themselves. Chiru Pal seated himself solemnly very close to the police. His jaw was set in a hard line that made the bones stand out beside the huge cavity of his mouth. Aniruddha, brooding and pensive, sat on the floor opposite him. When the enquiry was over the police stood up. Aniruddha rose also. Without looking at the villagers he could feel the hostility in their eyes as they stared at him. A man can bear actual pain because he has to, but the threat of affliction to come is unendurable. Aniruddha followed the policemen.

No sooner were they gone than voices rose in the pavilion. Everyone began talking at once, expressing his own opinion of the affair without listening to anybody else. Srihari Ghosh was not popular among the members of the Sadgop caste. But they felt the whole caste had been insulted when the police entered his granary. They were extremely agitated. Aniruddha's arrogance in defying the Council a few days earlier had only made matters worse, adding to the seriousness of what the police had done.

The voice of Debnath Ghosh could be heard above all the others. He spoke out in no uncertain manner, clearly and sharply. Debnath was exceptionally intelligent and had done well at school, although poverty and inconvenience in the house had forced him to give up his studies just before the matriculation. Debnath took an interest in everything and knew a great deal about the affairs of the village.

"The blacksmith, the carpenter and the barber cannot refuse to work for the village," Debnath was saying. "They are bound by the understaking given by their forefathers."

Srihari sat with his jaws clenched. He had not dreamed things would go so far. His mother, turning rice drying in the sun with her feet was calling out shrill execrations from the granary.

Padma stood at the outer door of the house, watching the road anxiously. She was terrified of the police and she could hear the cursing of Srihari's mother clearly. Padma herself was very fluent. Without naming anyone in particular she could pour out execrations that fitted the person concerned so perfectly they struck straight at the heart like unerring arrows. But today, in her distraction, she was unable to think of anything. She sighed with relief when Aniruddha returned. "Do you hear her?" she asked with burning eyes. "I'll start cursing now."

"No, don't. Let's go into the house." Aniruddha felt numb, cold, hard, icy. His voice was rough.

Padma fumed as she went into the storeroom for oil and brought it to him. "Don't you hear what she's saying?" she asked again. "How unlucky I am!" Padma and Aniruddha had no children. Chiru's mother was ominously predicting an early death for Aniruddha and a disreputable way of life for Padma. Padma began to massage her husband's arms. They were hard and knotted. The hairs were as prickly as the stubble of a beard. The hair on all the exposed parts of his body, his arms, his legs, his chest, was scorched by the fire of his forge. "Your arms are rough as files," Padma said as she rubbed in the oil.

"Polish the dagger in the bamboo case," Aniruddha said without listening to her.

Padma gazed into his face. "I have a nice sharp cleaver," she said, "I whetted it yesterday. I'll cut my throat with it some day."

"Why?"

"Do you think I'll live like that ill-fated Bayen woman when you get yourself hanged for murder?"

"Hu—ee!" was the only answer Aniruddha gave her. He had not thought of what would happen to Padma. Otherwise he had no objection, in the present state of his feelings, to going to jail for hurting Chiru or being hanged for murdering him.

"I asked you not to go to the police," Padma said, "but you wouldn't listen. What good did it do? Have the police helped? People are more annoyed than ever with us! And when I want to give them a piece of my mind you roar like a tiger! You won't even let me curse them."

Aniruddha's repressed anger made him restless and impatient, but he did not dare speak too harshly to Padma, nor did he want to. He had to be very careful in his dealings with the childless Padma. She would sulk and cry and fuss like a little girl, for the slightest reason. At other times she bore the roughest treatment with a smile, the way a mother puts up with a naughty child. Aniruddha was able to sense her mood. Today she seemed petulant. Aniruddha controlled his irritation with an effort.

"Where is the towel?" he asked, getting up.

That was enough to offend Padma. She said nothing, lifting her face swiftly to look at him. Then she took up the oil and went out.

"Have you any idea what time it is?" Aniruddha frowned. "Just look at the shadows! It must be three o'clock."

"Sit down. Bathe here in the house. I'll fetch the water for you." Padma handed Aniruddha the towel as she looked apprehensively at the shadows that lay across the courtyard.

Aniruddha threw the towel over his shoulder and said, "It'll be quicker for me to go to the pond, Padma. I'll be back in a minute. A quick dip, like a cormorant. That's all. You can serve the rice in the mean time." He hurried out.

Padma stopped at the door of the kitchen, with her hand on the chain. The lunch was cold! Would he like it that way? He was as fastidious about such things as a gentleman. A nawab! That's what he was, spending as much as he earned. Blacksmiths, barbers, potters and goldsmiths have a reputation for spending freely. But Padma had never seen anyone as extravagant as Aniruddha. He had begun to spend more since he had opened a smithy in the market town. How many people in the village had ever eaten hilsa fish at a rupee a seer? He would barely touch his food if she did not warm it for him now. Padma had planted some onions on the bank of the pond at the beginning of the month of Aswin. They had grown well. She thought it would be nice to fry some for him. As she approached the back door she noticed somebody standing just outside it. She caught a glimpse of white clothes. Padma shuddered. She remembered the way Chiru Pal had laughed the day before. She retreated a few steps and cried, "Who is it? Who's standing there?"

Surprised, a woman timidly entered the courtyard. Padma was relieved. It was not a man. The next minute she was dumbfounded. The woman was Chiru Pal's wife! She had been pretty at one time, she was not more than thirty or thirty-two years old, but she had aged prematurely. There was a pitiful pleading in her eyes. She pressed her hands together and greeted Padma.

"Bhai," she said.

Padma could think of nothing to say. She knew her very well. There was no better woman. And Padma knew she came of a good family. Padma had both seen and heard the way Chiru Pal beat her, and his mother railed at her day and night. Padma knew how much the poor woman had to endure.

"I've come to touch your feet," Chiru's wife came up to her and bent down.

"No, no, no!" Padma retreated a few steps. "What are you doing?"

"Bhai," she repeated, "please don't curse my sons. Curse the person who has injured you if you wish. I have nothing to say to that."

Only two of Chiru Pal's seven sons were alive. They both suffered from the disease they inherited from their father. One

was sickly and the other a cripple.

The envy childless Padma felt for all mothers of children was forgotten for the moment. She sighed.

"A great deal of harm has been done you," Chiru Pal's wife said, "I know. I am a farmer's daughter. Take this," she pressed two ten-rupee notes into the hands of the astonished Padma and went on. "I've come here secretly, Bhai. If anyone finds out—" She turned and left as silently and quickly as she had come, pausing at the door to renew her request. "My sons have done no harm. Please spare them."

The next instant she had disappeared. Padma stood without moving for a long time, numbly.

The sounds of a fracas nearby roused her. Some trouble had started again. A voice rose above the melee. Padma listened attentively. Was it Aniruddha? No, it wasn't. Then who was it? Chiru Pal? No. Who could it be? Padma hurried to the front door and went out into the road. She could hear more clearly now. The voice was none other than that of the only Brahmin resident in the village, Harendra Ghosal. Padma was reassured and smiled mockingly. Harendra Ghosal was a bit unbalanced. There was no doubt about it. In everything he always had to go one better than anyone else. When Chiru Pal purchased a bicycle, Harendra Ghosal mortgaged some land and bought a cycle and a gramophone. Then Chiru Pal circulated a report that he was about to purchase a horse, just to see the fun. Harendra consulted his mother and the two of them announced that if Chiru Pal bought a horse, he would buy an elephant. What had happened to the poor Brahmin?

There were no children around she could question.

Padma saw Aniruddha coming back. He looked at her and burst out laughing.

"What're you laughing at?" asked Padma.

Aniruddha was laughing too hard to answer.

"What's the matter with you? Unless you tell me what you're laughing at, how can I know? What's all the shouting about? What's happened? Why is the old Brahmin screaming?"

"He's been rightly served! Tara, the barber—" Aniruddha's mirth forced him to break off. As he changed his clothes and sat down to lunch he finished the story. Tara, the barber, had followed Aniruddha's example and announced that cash payment must be made for his services. The grain he received annually was not sufficient. The Brahmin had come to him for a shave. Tara asked him for money. The Brahmin scolded him but promised to pay.

Barbers are cunning by nature. Tara shaved half the Brahmin's face and asked, "Where's the money? Give it to me."

"I'll pay you tomorrow," answered the Brahmin.

Tara at once gathered up the implements of his trade and went into his house, saying, "I'll finish shaving you tomorrow then."

This was the cause of the hubbub. The Brahmin was swearing at Tara in three languages, Hindi, Persian and English! The village people had gathered round him. Aniruddha's amusement was so great he exploded with laughter. The rice in his mouth scattered over the floor.

Padma was clean in her habits. Ordinarily she would have scolded him but today she said nothing. She had not smiled once while Aniruddha had been laughing. He noticed her silence suddenly and asked in much surprise, "What's wrong with you today?"

"Chiru Pal's wife came to see me secretly," she answered gravely.

"Who?" Aniruddha was amazed.

"Chiru Pal's wife," said Padma and related what had happened. Untying the knot in her sari she took out the two ten-rupee notes and showed them to him.

Aniruddha said nothing.

"Ah! A mother's heart!" sighed Padma.

Aniruddha sat for a while longer, shook himself and stood up. "Bah!" he exclaimed, "all the work that's waiting! Four miles to walk on a full stomach!"

He washed his hands and face, lit a cigarette and said, "Give me one of those notes, will you?"

Padma frowned and looked at him. "I've got to buy five rupees worth of iron," Aniruddha explained with a smile. "I had to spend five rupees of a customer's money in order to pay Chiru. And—"

Padma put one of the notes down in front of him without a word.

"And I—I promise—I'll not spend more than a rupee! How long is it since I've had a drink? Can you tell me?"

Liquor.

Padma said nothing. She seemed to have developed a sudden aversion for Aniruddha.

Chapter 6

THE consequences of the barber's joke were far-reaching and serious. It was no laughing matter, though the villagers enjoyed the Brahmin's discomfiture and there was a lot of pleasantries over it.

The first to protest was Harish Mandal, a respected elder and a man of feeling. "It isn't funny," he said, "stop laughing. What have things come to!" People looked at him and quietened down. Harish was Chiru Pal's uncle. He too was a heavily built man and pretended to intelligence. He spoke weightily. "Total anarchy," he pronounced.

"How can you prevent it?" asked Debnath. He was the only one who had not joined in the general merriment. "Is there any unity? When the Council of Five met the other day to consider the case of the blacksmith and the carpenter, old Chaudhury got up and left. The doctor did not even come. It was the doctor who advised Aniruddha to go to the police."

"True is the name of Hari!" exclaimed Bhabesh with a sigh. "By the time the age of Kali is over there will be no distinctions left. Can that prophecy be wrong? All sense of right and wrong will be lost."

"Have you heard about Lutni, the midwife?" Harish asked. "My daughter-in-law is going on nine months. I sent word to Lutni and I asked her to tell us if she goes on a night call. She promised to attend the case but she said she must be paid cash down."

"Huh," Bhabesh was deep in thought.

"Without a king a kingdom comes to ruin, they say," Harish commented. "It's very true. Our zemindar is not much of a master. He might just as well not be here!"

"Leave the zemindar out of it," said Debnath, "in what way is he a bad master? It is for you—not for him—to deal with matters of this kind. Why doesn't one of you take a firm stand and

summon a meeting of the Council? Every one will have to attend. Do they think they're being clever when they don't come? Will they never need help themselves? Are their houses built of iron? Invite Chaudhury. Invite the doctor. Consult them first. Then ask the blacksmith, the carpenter, the barber, the cobbler, the midwife and the washerman to come. See that justice is done."

Harish looked at the others. "Debnath's suggestion is a good one. Don't you think so?"

"Excellent," Bhabesh agreed.

"Yes, let's do what he says," said Natbar.

"Call the meeting this evening," Debnath was enthusiastic. "I'll arrange everything. There is a forty-watt light bulb in the school. I'll get it for you. I'll inform everybody. Do you all agree?"

Harish looked around questioningly.

The temple pavilion was lighted and filled with people after a long time. Thirty years ago this had been the case nearly every evening. Dice games, singing parties, trials, naming ceremonies, weddings, funerals and almost all other village functions had taken place there. When guests or relatives had come to visit, they had been received in the pavilion. It had been the centre of the life of the village. Traces of the paintings on the walls and pillars were still visible, although time had effaced most of them. In the old days no one had a sitting room in his own house where he could receive a guest at home. Doctor Jaggan's grandfather had been the first to build one. In the beginning he had seen his patients at the pavilion. He moved his dispensary to his house later, either because his practice had grown and he was more prosperous or because of an exchange of words with the zemindar's steward. His house became the meeting place for his friends, patients and their relatives. He served tea and betel nuts. The pavilion's importance began to decline. Little by little others followed the doctor's example and added sitting rooms to their houses. They sat and chatted with their friends at home. Some sat alone beside a lantern and stared into the darkness. There were now many places in the village where people gathered in small groups and talked, but the doctor's house still attracted the largest number. Patients and their relatives were undeterred by his overbearing manner. Others went to hear the latest news in the bi-weekly to which he subscribed. Debnath read the paper aloud to the others although he did not wholly approve of the doctor. The Non-cooperation Movement had come to an end and the columns of the paper were full of the fulminations of the Swaraj Party. The hearers were pleasantly excited by them. A warm pulse beat through the torpid blood of the village.

It was Debnath who was receiving people at the pavilion that evening. He was the organiser of the meeting. His friends had gathered and started talking before the appointed hour. A fire had been lit outside the pavilion, and some of the lower caste people were sitting around it. It was close to the great tree in the courtyard of the temple beneath which was the shrine of the goddess of fertility, Shasti. The image worshipped as Shasti was actually of Vasudev. It was set deep among the roots of the tree. Dwarka Chaudhury, the doctor, Chiru Pal and several others had not yet come.

"It does look nice!" exclaimed Bhabesh as he looked up at the pavilion, illuminated by the forty-watt light bulb.

"The pavilion must be repaired," declared Harish as he too looked around. "How nice it is! What a fine frame! What wood!"

"Do you know," asked Debnath, "what is written in the centre of the six-petalled lotus? *Yavacchandarkamedini*. That means the pavilion will exist as long as the sun, moon and stars."

"That it will! That it will!" Bhabesh Pal was excited. He felt thrilled.

"This is quite an occasion," said Dwarka Chaudhury as he appeared, carrying his cane. Debnath rose solicitously and sent two boys to fetch Chiru and the doctor. The doctor refused to come. He said he was too busy. He had, in fact, just put on his spectacles and sat down to read the newspaper. Chiru did not come because he had fever. He said he would abide by any decision reached by the Council of Five. His modesty surprised and pleased Debnath.

Chiru Pal made no pretence to modesty of any kind. What he said was due to his unnatural condition. He did not have fever. Like a wounded python he was turning and twisting in his hole with remorseless fury. He sat huddled over his large water pipe on the inner verandah of his house and puffed at it sulkily for a long time. His gaze was fixed stonily on a spot in the courtyard. He was revolving many plans in his mind.

What if he set fire to the house? His heart leaped with pleasure at the thought. The next minute he said no to himself. He might get into trouble again if he acted too quickly, in the heat of his anger. He had had to give his friend the Head Constable fifty rupees that very morning. His mother was still grumbling and scolding him about it.

"What a temper you have! Why don't you die! Idiot! You can't wait a second! You long-legged sheep! Fifty rupees

squeezed right out of me! Why don't you crush me under a bamboo across my breast? Let my bones cool!"

Srihari paid no attention to her. At any other time he would have taken the old woman by the hair, thrown her down in the courtyard and beaten her without pity. But that day he was completely absorbed in thoughts of revenge. He knew Aniruddha came home at nine or ten o'clock at night. A sudden assault in the dark? No, the carpenter was always with him. Was it so hard to manage both of them? His friend, Garanchi, would help him gladly.

The next instant he shuddered. If he were caught he would go to the gallows. His shudder was so noticeable, even his dim-sighted old mother saw it. "Are you having a nightmare or something that you're shaking like a child in his sleep? Blackfaced imp!" She cried. Srihari glared balefully at his mother.

"A—e!" he called, addressing his wife. "Do you hear me? Change the tobacco!" She was sitting in the kitchen. The rice was on the stove. Chiru's eldest son was sitting beside her. He was holding a book open in the lamp light but he was watching his father. He was a thin, sickly ten-year-old. A bundle of madulis hung around his neck. He observed every movement his father made with large, strangely quiet, stupid eyes. Srihari's youngest son was deaf and dumb and a cripple. He was also sitting near his mother. His chest was wet with the saliva drooling from his mouth. The eldest boy stood up and took the tobacco cup. Srihari looked at him. The boy was a strange child. He never cried when Srihari beat him. He just looked at him with his wide eyes. Srihari found it difficult even to beat his wife because of him. He hovered around his mother constantly, and if anyone raised a hand against her he turned into a wild beast. Only the other day he had driven a needle into Srihari's back while he was chastising her. Srihari looked from his son to his wife. Her white, thin face was flushed by the heat of the stove. The skin scarcely covered the bones. Srihari looked away.

Yes, there was something else that could be done! His heart pounded. He could climb the wall of Aniruddha's house when he was not at home and carry Padma off like a tiger. But the knife in the hands of the tall, strong blacksmith's wife was very sharp! The look in her eyes had been cold and cunning. The way the knife flashed in the sun that day had nearly blinded Srihari.

Durga, Durga of the Bayens, was much better-looking than Padma. She was just as young and her complexion was much fairer. Durga was unrivalled; she was seductive, voluptuous! But many enjoyed her and Srihari no longer felt attracted to her

so strongly. And Durga's brother, Patu, had the insolence to complain against him to the zemindar. The Bayens were getting out of hand. Srihari sneered contemptuously. The zemindar had pawned his son's golden girdle. It was with him, Srihari. Srihari rose abruptly.

Srihari's wife put fresh tobacco in the cup of the water pipe and replaced it. The pipe had lost its attraction for Srihari. He took cigarettes and matches from the pocket of a tunic hanging on a nail and went out. Making his way stealthily down by-lanes and up narrow alleys he reached the neighbourhood of the Bayens.

Every evening the people who lived here gathered at Dharmaraj Tola, an open space beneath a large bokul tree on the edge of the village. Stories were told, songs sung, religious fêtes held. And sometimes they quarrelled. That evening a dispute was in progress. There was a lot of noise. Srihari concealed himself in the darkness beneath a tree and listened.

Patu was shouting angrily.

Durga's shrill voice rose defiantly. "You call yourself my brother? Brother? You don't feed me. All you do is beat me! What right have you to beat me? I'll do exactly as I like. What is it to you if a thousand people come to my room?"

Durga's mother began to scream. Srihari smiled. The dispute was about him.

He left the shelter of the tree and made his way noiselessly to Durga's house. All the houses were empty. Everybody was at the Dharmaraj Tola. Srihari cautiously entered Durga's courtyard. It was a small unfenced area. Two houses stood on opposite sides of it. Durga and her mother lived in one, Patu and his wife in the other. Srihari's eyes were on Patu's house. Where was his small, round cat-like wife? Srihari was disappointed. The door was closed. There was no one about.

Suddenly a dog squealed and ran yelping across the yard. Perhaps it had come in the hope of finding a bit of raw leather. Srihari smiled and lit a cigarette. Concealing it carefully in the palm of his large hand he came away. Who knew how long he would have to wait for Durga? He went back to his place beneath the tree.

The dispute was growing louder and louder. Srihari lighted another cigarette. When he left the tree a little later he pushed the burning butt into the thatch of Patu's house and turned homewards, walking swiftly and with light steps.

The meeting at the temple pavilion was in full swing.

Srihari smiled.

It was not long before a terrifying reddish glow rose into the dark sky above the village. The stars disappeared. Bits of straw

thrown up by the flames glowed and went up like carnival rockets. Every now and then a burning bamboo exploded and the splinters fell in showers over the fruit trees. Fire! Fire! Frightened yelling. The shrill wailing of women and children rose in waves, filling the air, grew heavy and slowly subsided.

The gathering at Dharmaraj Tola and the meeting in the pavilion broke up at once.

Chapter 7

THE fire spread. Not only Patu's house but all the houses in the untouchable quarter were burnt down. Only two or three huts which were protected by large trees, escaped. The small, low-roofed houses were poor dwellings, thatched thinly with straw over bamboo frames. There had been no rain since the beginning of the month of Karttik, and the strong sunlight had dried them out so thoroughly they were like gunpowder. They burst into flames as soon as the fire touched them. It did not take long for them to burn down. Many of the villagers came running to help, especially the young men. They did their best, but there were not enough buckets to draw sufficient water, and no room between the blazing buildings for them to stand. Doctor Jaggan placed himself at their head. As long as the fire lasted he shouted orders and gave suggestions. He was hoarse by the time it was over.

The homeless were given permission to pass the night in the pavilion but so strange is human nature they could not tear themselves away from their ruined homesteads. The early winter night was chill, and they spent it in the open, making places for themselves around the smoking ruins. The children slept. The women wailed mournfully. Their lament was like a song. The men blamed each other, and boasted, smoking tobacco lighted at the smouldering ashes. Nearly every family possessed a couple of cows or goats. The animals had been untied when the fire broke out. There was no way of finding them that night. Everybody had ducks and chickens. Some of these had been burnt as the smell of their roasting flesh testified. Those which had survived returned to their homes of their own accord and settled down

beside their owners, fluffing their feathers and drawing themselves together in order to take as little space as possible. Most of the villager's other possessions—a few clothes, fishing traps, reed mats, pillows and quilts, brass utensils and earthen pots—had either been burnt or were buried under fallen roofs. What they were able to salvage they piled in the centre of their family circles for safety. Towards the end of the night, the dew and cold forced them all to lie down. For some time they slept in the silence of exhaustion.

In the morning the women lifted their voices in lament once more and then as the sun rose, set to work with the men to clear the sites of their homes. Basket after basket was filled with ashes and dumped on manure piles. Charred pieces of wood were collected and stacked on one side for use as firewood. Utensils dug out from the ruins were piled separately. The people knew exactly what to do. Catastrophes were not an uncommon occurrence in their lives. Sometimes floods swept their homes away, sometimes old or dilapidated structures collapsed during a summer rain storm. The women collected dry leaves to light their stoves with. A spark of tobacco from a pipe or the stub of a cigarette carelessly tossed into a heap of leaves under the influence of drink sometimes started fires. For generations they had been trained in the art of rebuilding their homes after a misfortune. After the ground had been cleared some arrangement for food had to be made. The adults usually ate rice left over from the evening before, and the children were given puffed rice. All their provisions had been destroyed. The youngest children had already begun to cry for food. There was nothing to give them. Here and there a mother slapped a child, shouting, "Your tummy's a devil. It's on fire!"

For food they would have to go to the houses of their masters. Their masters always helped them in circumstances like these. Most of them worked as labourers in the fields on a fixed annual wage or for a share of the land's produce. Some worked for monthly rations or a monthly measure of grain. The young boys worked as cowherds and received four dhutis a year. The older boys were given a monthly wage of eight annas or a rupee as well. The amount of rice they received was also larger. Most of the grown-up young men received one third of the crop for their labour. The masters kept them supplied with rice during the sowing and planting seasons. The debt thus incurred was deducted when the harvest was divided. Interest was added. The rate of interest was between 25% and 30%. In bad years when the cultivators could not clear their debts the interest due

was added to the original loan and interest charged on both. They did not see anything unfair in this arrangement. On the contrary they were grateful for the assurance of help in times of emergency. They did not have to worry. The women also worked. They cleaned and swept the houses of the more prosperous farmers, threw out garbage, washed dishes and clothes, tidying up generally. They were paid for their labour. Milk also brought in a little. Farmers kept their own cows, so the untouchables sold their milk in Konkona. They earned a little from the cowdung chips they also sold there.

Patu had none of these resources. He was a Bayen by caste, that is to say, a tanner, cobbler and drummer. He had some land that had been allotted to him in lieu of wages, and he received a share of the rice harvested on the trust lands attached to the shrines of Siva and Kali and the Chandi shrine in a neighbouring village as he played the drum at the religious festivals held there, like his father and grandfather before him. He also had a pair of plough oxen with which he farmed some land in Konkona as a sharecropper. And he sold the skins he obtained from the charnel field to dealers in hides and leather. The dealers were always ready to help with advances of three or four rupees in time of need. But this source of income had been largely lost. The zemindar had leased the charnel field to a dealer of his choice. Patu was getting only a few annas for his labour, nothing more. There had been a dispute with the dealer over this. Would he be willing to help? The gentleman on whose land he was a sharecropper might give him something but he would not give anything without executing a bond. Patu was afraid of signing bonds. For him it could mean a lot of trouble. Where would he go if it led to a complaint being lodged in court and the loss of his homestead? This house was all he had in the world.

Patu was pondering over these things as he hastily swept up the ashes. The resentment to which Chiru Pal's beating had given rise, was growing steadily from day to day. In his emotion he had disclosed to the zemindar what he had told Dwarka Chaudhury about his sister, Durga, that day in Amarkunda. His caste people had questioned him about it and shamed him: had he or had he not, they asked, of his accord, disclosed his disgrace to the zemindar and Dwarka Chaudhury, without even being asked?

Yes, he had.

"Then why should you not be outcasted?"

That possibility had not occurred to Patu. It sent a thrill of fear through him. He had gone home, taken Durga by the hair and dragged her into the midst of the meeting. He had thrown her to the ground and shouted, "Ask this shameless creature. I don't share her meals. Even one's father becomes a stranger when he eats separately."

Durga's mother had followed them, shrieking. Patu's cat-like wife was the last to come, wailing softly. A word-slinging match ensued. Words came fast and sharp. No one was spared. Durga, the prostitute, shrilly made known the secrets of every woman in the village. Then she proclaimed proudly, "My house is my own. I earn my living. Anyone who pleases me may come to my house. What is it to you?" Turning to her brother, she demanded, "Do you pay for my food? Will you pay for it? See to your own wife . . ."

Patu had struck her several more times. His wife swore at her bitterly from under her veil. The excitement mounted. A point was reached when feelings ran so high a fight seemed imminent. The fire had blazed up just at the moment.

The vexation of the last two days and, added to it, the burning of his house and the anguish of homelessness, made Patu smoulder like a volcano. He was working in silence when the sound of his wife's wailing came to his ears. She had collected the cattle and tethered them to a stake at the foot of a palm tree and taken the ducks down to a nearby pond. Now she came to her husband's help. She began filling baskets with ash and dumping them on the manure pile. Patu bared his teeth at her like a ferocious animal and shouted, "Eya-i. See here. Stop whining I tell you. I'll break your bones, I will."

Patu's wife was out of humour herself after spending the night in the open and because of the fire. She hissed at him like a jungle cat, "Why? Why will you break my bones? You've been humiliated in the meeting so you turn on your wife. Isn't that it? You haven't the guts to say anything to your wicked sister—"

Patu could bear no more. He sprang upon her like a tiger, flung her to the ground and took her by the throat. He was completely beside himself.

Directly opposite Patu's house, on the other side of the courtyard, Durga lived with her mother. They were also busily sweeping up ashes. Durga had turned round at her sister-in-law's words. She stood like a snake with a raised hood. But when she saw how Patu was punishing her she said nothing, merely nodding wisely at her brother, "Yes, discipline your wife a little. Don't let her ride on your head."

"Let go! Let go! You swine," the doctor's hoarse voice called out, "hah-ha-ha. You'll kill her."

The doctor took Patu by the hair and dragged him back. Patu let go of his wife and stood there panting. "Just see how insolent she is. The house is burnt down and she—" he cried.

"Water. Bring water! Quickly! Swine! Blockhead!" Jaggan knelt beside the woman. She was unconscious, lying limply on the ground. The doctor took her wrist and felt for the pulse anxiously.

Patu leaned over her and peered into her face. He was suddenly frightened. "Ogo," he burst out sobbing, "I've killed her. I've killed my wife."

"Oh, re, what have you done, son?" Patu's mother shrieked.

"Water, water, I tell you! Bring water! Quickly!" The doctor was worried.

It was Durga who fetched the water. She sat down, took her sister-in-law's head on her lap and began to run her hands over her chest. "Breathe into her mouth, Durga," said the doctor as he slapped water over her face.

But before Durga could follow his instruction, Patu's wife sighed and opened her eyes. Some time later she sat up and began to cry. Her voice was so weak and hoarse she could barely make a sound, yet she strove with all her strength to scream.

Doctor Jaggan counted the number of houses that had burnt down and entered the figure in a notebook. He also noted down the number of people rendered destitute. He would send the news to the paper. A petition to the Magistrate had already been drafted, and he was planning to form a relief committee to collect straw, bamboos, rice, old clothes, money and other contributions from the surrounding villages. He called the people and said to them, "Go to your masters, all of you. Ask them for two bamboos each, ten bundles of straw and enough food for a week. I'll get everything else you need. A petition is ready. We'll send it to the Magistrate. Come this afternoon and sign it."

The mention of the Magistrate alarmed them. They said nothing. To them officials were people who inflicted punishment. They know the Magistrate as the master of the constables and of the Sub-Inspector of Police. His very name inspired terror. Who knew what new disaster would threaten them if a petition was sent to him?

"Do you understand me?" asked the doctor. "Why don't you say something?"

"Your honour, the Magistrate—" Satish Bauri spoke up.

"Yes, the Magistrate."

"What if we get into more trouble—"

"What trouble? He's in charge of the district. It's his duty to look after the welfare of the people. He has to help if you approach him."

"But, you honour, but—"

"But what?"

"The police, the constables, the Inspector and Sub-Inspector cause us a lot of trouble. Explanations. Interrogations. Pushing us about. A thousand botherations."

The doctor was furious. It always made him furious when anyone put obstacles in his way. He had hoped to have the opportunity to meet the Magistrate in connection with this relief work. The doctor had wanted to become a member of the local Union Board for a long time. He cherished this ambition not for the honour of it but because it would enable him to do something for the people. All the Union Board seats had been taken over by the gentlemen of Konkona. Every village in the area belonged to one or the other of their landed estates. At the last election, Jaggan Ghosh had got only three votes. The seats filled by Government nomination always went to Konkona people. The higher officials were acquainted with them and were their guests. Their applications were approved. The doctor was badly in need of a good excuse to make the acquaintance of the Magistrate in connection with the welfare work. The unexpected obstruction made him all the more angry for that reason "Then rot and die," he cried, "you ignorant swine. Rot and die."

"What's the matter, doctor? What's happened?" Old Dwarka Chaudhury emerged from the bushes behind him. He had come to express his sympathy with the people afflicted by the disaster, in obedience to a sense of duty he had inherited from his forefathers. He did all he could for them.

"Just see how stupid they are!" the doctor exclaimed, on seeing him. "I'm telling them to send a petition to the Magistrate. Do you know what they say? They say it's a lot of botheration—police and inspectors."

"They'll find all they need in the village itself," old Chaudhury said mildly. "Why trouble the Magistrate? I'll give each of them eight bundles of straw and five bamboos. Others will do the same. In this way . . ."

The doctor didn't stay to hear more. He turned and walked rapidly away. "Just come to me for help again," he said as he left. A short distance away he stopped and cried, "Where were you last night? Last night?"

"There's no harm in submitting a petition." Chaudhury considered the proposal. "You can do it since the doctor advises you to, Satish. Don't you think so, son? It'll be all to the good

if the Magistrate is moved to take pity on you, won't it? Go to the doctor's this afternoon."

"We're afraid," explained Satish. "We won't get into more trouble, will we, Chaudhury Mashay?"

"What's there to be afraid of? I don't think there'll be any trouble, son. No, no—there won't be any trouble."

In the afternoon they all turned up at the doctor's house. Only Patu refused to go.

The doctor was pleased. He greeted them one by one. "Where's Patu?" he asked, "Patu?"

"Patu, your honour," Satish said, "refused to come. He says he's going to leave the village."

"Leave the village? Why? What's he so angry about?"

"Patu knows. He says he's going to the market town across the river. He says he can make a living wherever he can work."

"But he gets a share of the grain from the trust lands."

"He'll give it up. Mashay. He says it's not enough." Satish was emphatic. It's not worth keeping. He can't live on it. What'll he do with it? Patu Bayen is talking like a rich man, a vakil or a barrister. Don't pay any attention to him."

"Aha! Let him. May he grow rich! May flowers and sandalwood bless your lips." Durga was standing behind the others. She snapped out. "What does it matter to anybody if he leaves the village? What do you care? Vakil! Barrister! Why talk such nonsense? Because you'll profit if he leaves, that's why. You'll get a bigger share of charity."

"Stop it, Durga. Stop it," the doctor reproved her.

"Why should I? For what? What's all the talk about?" She turned and left, walking in the direction of her house.

"Durga! Durga! Your signature."

"No."

"Then you won't get any government money."

"I didn't come to give you my signature," Durga stopped and said, "I came to buy the palm tree you want to sell. Does a person who has money need to beg? Go hang yourselves!" She turned and went on her way.

When she reached the corner of the pond which belonged to Srihari Pal she saw him standing among the bamboos which covered its banks. Durga smiled and said, "I need money. A lot." She spread her hands to show how much, "I'm going to build a house. Money! A lot. Do you understand?"

Srihari ignored her, asking, "What's the petition about?"

"The petition is to the Magistrate. Our houses have burnt down. That's why."

"That rascally doctor is petitioning against me, is he? I'll teach the fellow," Srihari's expression was terrible.

Durga was watching him with her keen eyes. She realised he was the guilty man. "Sure," she said gravely, "it was you who set fire to the house."

"Who says so? Did you see me?"

"Yes, I saw you."

"Keep quiet. I'll give you all the money you want."

Durga did not answer. She gave Srihari a strange look and curved her lips deprecatingly. Then she went on her way. Srihari stared after her with a smile on his toothless mouth.

Chapter 8

DURGA was a handsome and shapely woman. Even her complexion was fair which, among people of her caste, was as rare as it was unexpected. And there was something about her that was desirable, intoxicating. She attracted and held the hearts of ordinary men. They softened at the sight of her.

Patu had confessed to Dwarka Chaudhury that his mother's conduct had not always been absolutely correct. The exceptional quality of Durga's beauty was a living proof of it.

There is no culture strong enough to prevent or punish such traits of character among the Bayens. Even husbands overlook minor irregularities, particularly if a gentleman of caste and ample means is involved. But Durga's behaviour exceeded all bounds. She pleased herself, making no distinction between high and low. Late at night she made her way to the garden houses of the Konkona zemindars. She knew the president of the Union Board. People even said the Sub-Inspector of Police and the magistrates were not unknown to her. Only the other night she had gone to meet the Vice-Chairman of the District Board, Mukherjee Saheb. The Head Constable had escorted her like a body guard. Durga was proud of her connections and considered herself a cut above her caste. She made no effort to conceal her occupation. People blamed her mother. It was her mother, they said, who had forced her to leave her husband and adopt this way of life. But her mother was not to blame. Durga had been married in Konkona. Her mother-in-law worked in one of the gentlemen's houses as a maid-servant. One day her

mother-in-law was ill and Durga went to do her work. When she was about to come home a servant called her and scolded her for not sweeping the garden house. He opened a door for her and told her to go in. One of the gentlemen was there. Durga was alarmed. She drew her veil over her face and turned to flee. But what was this? The door had been locked from outside.

She emerged an hour or so later with a five rupee note tied in the corner of her sari. On the way back she had come home to her mother instead of going to her husband's house. She was frightened, disturbed and disgusted. At the same time she was pleased by the gentleman's passionate interest in her and the money. Her mother's eyes glowed strangely when she heard the story. The vista of a bright and shining future for her daughter floated before her. She showed her the way to it. Durga embarked on the way of life she now followed.

Durga's relationship with Chiru Pal was strictly a matter of business. She had never felt the slightest tenderness for him. Today she felt the fiercest contempt and resentment. No matter how much she might quarrel with Patu or look down on her caste people, she felt sorry for them in their trouble. All the way home she kept wondering whether it was feasible to put cattle poison in Chiru Pal's drink.

"What did the doctor say? Will he sell the tree?" Durga's mother asked. Durga was so deep in thought that she had not realised she had reached home.

"No," she answered with a start.

"Won't he sell it?"

"I didn't ask him."

"Then what did you go for?" Durga did not answer. She gave her mother a sharp look.

Her mother was living on the earnings of her daughter. The look Durga gave her frightened her into silence.

"Hamdu Sheikh came," she said after a time.

Durga still said nothing.

"He'll come back. He's at Dharmaraj Tola, talking to people," Durga's mother went on.

"Why? What does he want? I'm not selling my cows or goats," Durga said at last. She had a small herd of goats, several cows and a young ox. Hamdu Sheikh, the trader, hurried to the Bayen neighbourhood as soon as he heard about the fire. He bought cows and goats from these people. When necessary he gave advances, from eight annas to three or four rupees. He would deduct both the loan and the interest from the price of the livestock. He had come to give loans that day and buy any livestock he could. Hamdu had already made Durga many offers for her young ox but Durga had refused to

sell it. Today he had made another offer and given Durga's mother four annas on the sly, promising solemnly, with his face towards Mecca, to give her another four annas if the deal went through. She was not pleased at what her daughter said. "How will you build the house if you don't sell something?" she asked rather hotly.

"You daughter of a swine! Will your father pay for it? Do you understand? I'll sell my conch bracelets with the gold bands." Durga had a small quantity of gold jewelry. It was not much but, in their caste, it represented the realisation of a dream.

Durga's mother was on the point of exploding, but Durga was unperturbed. "How much has Hamdu Sheikh paid you?" she demanded. "Do you think I don't know anything? Don't I eat rice like the rest of you?"

Her mother was defeated. She subsided like a doused bomb.

"You're my own daughter," she broke out abruptly into a wail, "and you dare to speak to me that way?"

"Stop it! Stop it! That's enough!" Durga paid no attention to her weeping. "Can you tell me where Patu's gone? And where is that wife of his?"

Her mother was crying softly. The answer to Durga's question was contained in her lament. "Set fire to my womb!" she wailed. "Pelt me with stones! My son is no better than my daughter! She calls me a thief and he has left the country. He walks out on me while others are collecting palm fronds to build their houses again. Death to him! Let him freeze to death!"

"Are you going to cock or sit there whining?" Durga interrupted her roughly. "Don't we have to eat?"

"No, I'll never eat again. It's better for me to hang myself!" her mother wailed and wailed.

Durga said nothing. She brought in a rope and dropped it helpfully into her mother's lap. Then she went out in search of fire to light the stove.

The ancient bokul tree at Dharmaraj Tola spread its shade over a large area. The trunk was largely hollow. A storm had blown it over long ago and it lay almost level with the ground. But it was still living. This was attributed to the supernatural powers of Dharmaraj. Had a tree ever been known to survive in such circumstances? Piles of small terracotta horses stood around its base. These were placed there by those who made vows. The space around was kept clean and smooth. Hamdu Sheikh was seated in the shade, arguing over prices of cows and

goats. A couple of cows and six or seven goats he had just purchased were tethered nearby.

Hamdu was bargaining with the women whom he addressed as sisters, aunts, daughters-in-law. The men were all at the doctor's.

"It's just skin and bones," he was saying to a Bauri woman who was, for the moment, a sister-in-law. They were discussing a goat. There's not ten pounds of meat on it! Six at the most. I'll give you a rupee and four annas. Isn't that fair? Ask the others here. In such times as these who will give you more for it? Is it in your interest to sell the goat or in mine to buy it? Make up your mind!"

He caught sight of Durga and called to her. "Oh Durga Didi, I've been to your house five times already. Listen to me, Didi."

"I won't sell," answered Durga from a distance. She was looking for fire.

"I've not asked you to sell, have I? Don't sell. I have something else to say. Wait a minute and listen to me."

"What do you want to say?" Durga asked cautiously.

"Oh re baba re! Didi's riding a horse today."

"I've got to cook," Durga answered brusquely. "What is it? Tell me."

"I've a good suggestion. A good offer. How about roofing your house with corrugated iron? I know where some can be had cheaply."

"Corrugated iron?"

"Yes, yes. Good as new. The millowners will agree to sell it. A sure thing. Only forty rupees. Think it over."

Durga considered for a few minutes. She visualised her house with a roof that shone in the sunlight like silver. But she restrained herself and said, "Uhu. No."

"If you don't have the money now you can pay me later." Hamdu was persuasive. "In six months. A year."

Durga laughed and shook her head. "Uhu. Hamdu Bhai. Wash your hands of the ox. I'm not selling for two years yet." Durga swung round and walked away.

When she returned, carrying fire, she found the rope lying where she had left it. Her mother had not touched it. She was arguing loudly with Patu as she tried to light the stove. Patu was panting. He had just thrown two large bundles of palm fronds on one side of the courtyard. He was staring at his mother like an angry tiger. His wife was getting ready to cook, and collecting bits of wood, twigs and leaves for the fire.

Durga turned to her and said, without any preliminaries, "Don't bother to cook. We'll eat together. I'll get it ready."

"Durga," Patu looked at her, "Mother's saying anything that

comes into her head. Just listen to her, Durga. It won't do us any good, I tell you."

"Well, what can I do about it? She's been railing at me all morning: She's our mother, isn't she? You can't turn her out and you can't murder her."

"Of course not. You're right. A hundred times over. But, I ask you, how can I stay in the village?"

"Are you really going to leave? Really, Dada? Are you going to leave the home of your forefathers?"

Patu was silent. Later he said, "I've brought palm fronds, Durga. I suppose that's why. So late in the day—I went to the market town this morning, found a job and a place to stay. A job in a mill. Why else—"

Patu sat with his head resting on his folded arms, staring at the ground.

"Come on, get up," Durga said. "Take the couple of bamboos over there, pull them up to the roof and cover them with the fronds. A man doesn't leave the home of his forefathers, does he? Climb up. Sister-in-law and I will hand up what you need."

Patu sighed and stood up. Durga drew her sari tightly around her waist and tucked it in. "What an ass, Satish! Satish Bauri, re! He told the doctor Patu Bayen's a rich man now, a barrister. I told him I hoped his words would come true. You're rich. I said that when you left you'd make a gift of your lands to them."

Patu's plump little wife, soft as a cat, was healthy and strong. She worked hard, spinning around on her short legs like a top. She had already dragged the bamboos into the courtyard.

Chapter 9

SRIHARI had not intended to burn down the whole neighbourhood but he did not particularly mind when it happened. Low caste people are best kept in their places by occasional calamities. They had been getting very uppish. Beating them up did no good. The way to get the better of a nan is to hit him in the stomach, to deprive him of his food. Even a tiger can be caged and starved into submission.

In all these matters Srihari's teacher was the notorious Tripura Singh of Durgapur. Durgapur, where Srihari's maternal grandfather lived, was twenty miles away. His grandfather had been employed by Tripura Singh to look after the cultivation of his lands. Srihari had seen him on visits to Durgapur as a boy. Tripura Singh was a tall and formidable Rajput. He had started out in very modest circumstances, with only a few bighas of land. He worked his land like a demon. In addition he sold tobacco, going from village to village, carrying it in a basket on his head. He always carried a stout cane. Little by little he began to lend money and acquired enough cultivable land to be regarded as a jotedar. Eventually he purchased part of the zemindar's estate and became a small zemindar himself. Srihari had heard him declare, as he stroked his beard, which was a prize possession, and twirled his moustache, that he had burned the village down three times before people had begun to pay proper attention to him.

Every time there was a fire, Singh said, laughing, the villagers borrowed money from him. Those who did not borrow the first time, did the second. Those who held out the second time came the third. He had no hesitation whatsoever in making such disclosures. He used to declare that all big zemindars had made their fortunes the same way. One had only to read their family histories. His grandfather had been a dacoit by profession, in the pay of the Ratnagar zemindar. The business of the zemindar was dacoity. The Chatterjees of Sitanagar had secretly received stolen goods for a long time.

Srihari's grandfather told him what he did not hear from Singh himself and filled in the gaps in what he heard. The old man entertained his grandson with tales of the past after supper in the evenings as he sat smoking placidly. Tripura Singh's exploits had a legendary quality. Bahuballabh Pal owned a fine piece of land adjoining Tripura Singh's, about ten cottahs in area, for which Singh offered him as much as a hundred rupees. But Bahuballabh was unwise: he was very attached to that land. He refused to sell. One dark rainy night Tripura Singh took a mattock and effaced the boundaries between this plot and his own land so thoroughly that the next day Bahuballabh himself could not tell where his land began or ended. Bahuballabh started a lawsuit. He lost not only the case but also his young wife. A person or persons gagged her and carried her off when she went to fetch water from the pond one evening.

His grandfather added under his breath that the lady was still in Singhji's house. She was old now and did the work of a maid-servant.

There were five or six others like her there too.

The old man could not praise Tripura Singh's foresight and practical wisdom enough. "He was one of Lakshmi's favourites," he would say. "How clever he was! How lucky! He divined that the fortunes of the zemindar by whom he was retained, had begun to decline. There was never anything left of the estate revenues to pay his dues to the government when the time came. Singhji began to lend him money. He never said no to the zemindar. If he didn't have the money himself he borrowed it from somebody else for eight annas interest and lent it to the zemindar at an interest of one rupee. By continually renewing his handnotes, adding the interest to the original loan, he won the whole estate in lieu of payment when he finally pressed for his dues. Such fortunate men are rare." With that the old man would lift up his hands respectfully to the memory of his former master.

Srihari's father had been a highly successful farmer. He had turned barren land into rich fields by his own labour. His courtyard filled with rows of round bins had turned into a beautiful and prosperous abode for Lakshmi by a combination of hard work and careful expenditure. When, after his father's death, all this came to Srihari, he remembered his grandfather's guru, Tripura Singh, and modelled his life after his. He was not lazy about work. His crops yielded abundantly. But he did not, like his father, content himself with storing it away in his granaries. He began to lend it out on interest. The rate was 25 per cent or 50 per cent.

It was not that nobody had any respect at all for Srihari, but Srihari did not consider it sufficient. He felt that people hated him secretly and wished him ill no matter how much they professed to respect him to his face. There were times when he was tempted to set fire to the whole village and render it destitute. This wild impulse flashed strongly in him whenever he passed the house of an enemy like Doctor Jaggan. But he lacked Tripura Singh's daring. Nor were the times the same: Srihari had to suppress impulses that Tripura had been able to gratify. Srihari's sense of right and wrong, owing to the changed circumstances, was also somewhat stronger than Singh's.

It was because of this sense of right and wrong that he kept on making excuses to himself for the catastrophe of the night before. After sitting alone for a long time he rose abruptly and made his way to the scene of the fire. He stopped and turned back once or twice, for he felt a certain hesitation. At last he decided that the only place he would go to was the house of the boy who was his cowherd. Was it not his duty to look after him? "Ay-o," he cried aloud to himself as though to frighten

in advance anyone who tried to say anything to him. He was, actually, trying to shake off his own strange hesitation.

The cowherd feared his master like the devil himself. When he saw him coming he thought he was going to be punished for absenting himself from his work. He burst into tears. "Our house has burnt down," he sobbed, "that's why—"

Srihari could not but feel a certain shame when he saw the plight of the neighbourhood. "Why are you crying?" he asked affectionately. "What can be done? Nobody started the fire. It was an accident."

"Who can have done such a thing, Mashay? Why?" the boy's father said. "What harm have we done to anybody? Why should anyone set fire to our house?"

Srihari stared silently at the charred ruins of the buildings.

"It's the work of some lowborn rascal," the boy's father went on, "he must have set fire to a pile of leaves. How else—"

"Do one thing," said Srihari, "put your house up again as quickly as you can. Bring all the straw and bamboos you need from my house. Wood too." Then he turned to the boy and said, "Run along now and fetch ten seers of rice. I'll give you more grain tomorrow. Do you understand?"

The father grovelled at Srihari's feet.

Two or three other people had come up. One of them spoke to Srihari with folded hands. "If you would be so good as to spare a little grain for us, Ghosh Mashay--"

"Grain?"

"Yes, Mashay, otherwise we'll die of hunger."

"All right, I'll give five seers of rice to every family today. You don't have to repay it. Tomorrow I'll give you grain. Tomorrow is the day for grain—"

"Your honour?"

"I'll give each of you ten bundles of straw. Tell every one."

"Glory be to you, Mashay. Glory be! May good fortune be yours! May you have many sons and much grain!" Overwhelmed by Srihari's generosity the man darted away to spread the news. He went from house to house, telling everybody.

Srihari was as moved by the simple gratitude of these uneducated people as they were by his magnanimity. What he was giving them was nothing very great after all, and yet it brought them to his feet. It seemed to Srihari that the crime he had committed the night before was expiated by the tears of gratitude he saw in their eyes. He was unable to speak for emotion. Then he took hold of himself and said, "Go now. All of you. Go and take as much straw, rice and grain as you need." He returned home with a much lighter heart.

On his way he revolved many plans in his mind.

Water was very scarce during the hot summer months, and the people suffered for lack of it. Women had to fetch drinking water from the river. Those who thought it beneath them to go so far, drank the unwholesome water of the pond. Srihari decided to have a well dug. He also decided to donate fifty rupees for the purchase of furniture for the school. Less than five rupees had been raised when donations had been solicited from door to door. The village roads were in a deplorable state. Srihari decided to have them gravelled.

There were so many other things he could do. The floor of the temple pavilion could be cemented. He would write '*Sri-charanasrita* Srihari Ghosh' in black letters in the cement just like the Konkona gentlemen had inscribed their names in the white marble plaque set in the porch of Konkona's temple pavilion.

Srihari imagined people standing aside for him in gratitude as he passed, lifting their folded hands. To them he would be a distinguished personage.

Srihari experienced that day an emotion he had never felt before. Like a seed cast abroad by an unknown hand a new and different heart began to sprout and grow in him. He walked up and down for some time making plans, and it was almost dark when he reached his house. The poor people he had sent there were standing outside the door guiltily. And his mother was showering curses on them in pitiless and vulgar language. Srihari himself was not being spared. He also was the object of her generous vituperation. He entered the house angrily. His mother redoubled her efforts at the sight of him. "Oh, re, oh, you miserable, bamboo-chested runt! Since when have you become as open-handed as the great Karna Sen? That hoard of locusts is saying—"

Srihari had a very cruel way of showing his true nature in all its nakedness. He did not shout at such times. Silently, with a terrifying expression on his face and great deliberation he tortured men and animals, freezing them with terror like cold, cruel water. His mother fled precipitately through the back door when he turned this look upon her.

Srihari handed out the rice himself, giving to each his share without a word. "Come for grain and straw tomorrow," he said. "Don't mind what my mother says. Do you understand?"

"How can we mind?" said one of the villagers, touching Srihari's feet. In an effort to turn the matter off as lightly as possible, he stammered, "Mother is like Kali. There's no escape from her when she is angry!"

Srihari did not answer. His mother would not let him do

anything. A lot of money would be required to carry out his new plans and she was certain to make a fearful fuss. The old creature still kept the key to the big wooden safe on her person, pressed to her breast. If he tried to take any money out there was sure to be trouble. Srihari was not, of course, worried about money. The interest due to him from several large debtors would cover the expenses.

Chapter 10

BHUPAL the watchman was carrying a notice with the official seal of the Union Board on it. Patu walked in front of him, pounding vigorously on his drum. The notice read:

If the June and September instalments of taxes are not paid up in full within one week from the date of the issue of this notice immovable property will be put up for auction in order to realise the dues. The tax will be enhanced one and a half times and a fine added.

Doctor Jaggan blazed.

"What? What? What will be done?"

Bhupal timidly held out the notice in his hand and said, "See for yourself, you honour."

The doctor gave him a hard look and said, "You've forgotten how to bow your head, haven't you? That's what happens when you put on your official badge."

Bhupal was disconcerted. He quickly bent down and took the dust of the doctor's feet, lifting it to his head and lips. "You're mother and father to me. How can I forget, your honour?"

"Certainly," agreed Patu.

The doctor roared with anger when he read the notice. "Is this a joke? Has the Government issued instructions to turn people out of their homes to realise taxes? The grain is still standing in the fields. The foreclosure of immovable property. Do they think they can do what they like? Have they inherited the village? Just wait! I'll submit a petition today."

"We're only servants, Sir," Bhupal was apologetic. "We're only doing what we're told to do. That's all."

"You're doing your duty. What else can you do? Go on. Announce it by beat of drum."

Patu gave his drum several blows with his stick and said, "The harvest festival will take place on the twenty-second. Navanna."

"Navanna? The twenty-second?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Tell the others! I've nothing to do with the people of this village. I'll celebrate the harvest festival when it suits me."

Patu walked on without a word. The doctor stared after him gloomily. "Patu," he called.

"Your honour?" Patu turned round.

"Why didn't you come to sign the petition the other day? You're rich now, aren't you? I'm told you're going to move to town. Are you really leaving the village?"

Patu frowned with annoyance but he said nothing. The doctor entered the house and brought out the petition. "Here it is," he scolded affectionately, "put your thumb print on it. I've delayed sending it just for you."

Patu did not protest. He put his thumb print on the document. He had not come with the others because he had spent the day resentfully making plans to get away from the village. He had even gone to the market town to look for work and a place to live. His excitement had been temporary. If he had frowned a moment before it was because of the sarcastic tone the doctor had taken. He had no objection to accepting help or receiving alms. As he wiped the ink off his thumb on his hair he laughed with gratification and said, "Nobody does more for the poor than you do, Doctor." He bent down and took the dust of the doctor's shoes, lifting it to his head and lips. The watchman followed his example.

"Wait a minute," the doctor said. He had been busy with his thoughts. "Put your thumb prints on another paper."

"Your honour?" Patu asked in trepidation. Why another signature? He and others like him were afraid of signing anything.

"I'm going to submit a petition against the realisation of taxes in this manner. Your houses have burnt down. The grain is still standing in the fields. What do they mean by giving notice of foreclosure at such a time? Are we living under Mug rule?"

Patu's face paled with fright. A petition against the Union Board? He looked at Bhupal. The watchman was also alarmed.

"Sign!" cried the doctor. "Put your thumb prints here."

"No, your honour, I can't sign that." Patu walked away

rapidly. Bhupal followed him with relief. Bhupal decided to tell the Union Board President. If he didn't he might be suspected of being involved in this himself.

The doctor stared angrily after the fleeing pair. "Swine!" he exclaimed a minute later. "Anyone who tries to help them is an ass." With that he took up the new petition and was on the point of tearing it in two when Debu Ghosh stopped him.

"Don't do that, Doctor," he said, "don't tear it in two." He had been watching from a distance. Debu was always sympathetic in matters of this kind.

"Are you asking me not to tear it up?" asked the doctor, looking into his face. "Do you ask me to do anything for such people? You saw how they acted, didn't you?"

"I saw," answered Debu, "what good does it do to be angry with them? Give your petition to me. I'll sign it. And I'll get others to sign it too."

"Sit down," said the doctor, handing him a cigarette and matches. Then he called into the house, "Minu. Two cups of tea."

Minu was the doctor's daughter.

"Do you know what people think, Pandit?" the doctor said. "They think I have an axe to grind, that I hope to get something out of doing this kind of thing. They think I'll become a raja when their wrongs are righted although, of course, they will be much relieved."

Debu lighted the cigarette and handed the matches back to the doctor. "Of course you have an axe to grind, Doctor," he said.

"What?" the doctor looked at Debu in surprise and annoyance.

"Well, haven't you?" Debu stared at the tip of his cigarette and answered easily, with a smile, "Of course you have. You will become respected and esteemed. And be elected to the Union Board. It seems to me no man can live without an axe to grind."

Lines appeared on the doctor's forehead. "If what you say is called 'having an axe to grind', then even ascetics are guilty. Buddhadev himself had one. So did Vasishtha."

"Why define the concept in its narrowest sense? Selfishness in the best sense is not devoid of meaning." Debu was smiling.

"I do want to be a member of the Union Board. I most certainly do," confessed the doctor. "But I want it only in order to be able to do something for people. I don't believe in sitting around and telling beads in order to qualify for another world. Chiru Pal steals and commits adultery and at the same time recites his rosary regularly. He spends a lot on religious festi-

vals. I don't care for religion of that kind. I'd like to hit it over the head with a broom five times."

The doctor launched upon a long discourse. Who does not want to achieve fulfilment, to make the life of man blessed? Some strive to do it by seeking God, hoping to find him through the telling of beads, etc., others wish to accomplish it through service, doing good to others. And so on. Debu Ghosh might have delivered a discourse himself in reply, but he refrained, saying, "It's fine that you should want to help people, Doctor, that you should have the good of the village so much at heart. But why should you have such a poor opinion of the people themselves? You said just now you will not celebrate the harvest festival with the others. Two meetings have been held recently. You not only refused to come but incited the blacksmith to defy the Council."

"Never. I never incite anybody to act against the best interests of the village. Aniruddha's grain was stolen from his fields. I advised him to report the matter to the police, mentioning Chiru's name. That's all."

"Good. Why didn't you attend the meetings?"

"Meetings? I don't go to meetings where Chiru Pal is given an important position just because he has money."

"Smash his leadership then. Go to the meetings and smash it by your own strength. If you sit at home his importance will only increase from day to day."

Jaggan had nothing to say to that.

"Good. Why don't you celebrate the harvest festival with the rest of the village?"

"I haven't sworn that I won't," he said. The doctor was defeated.

"Yes," Debu was pleased. "Whatever we do should be done together. Just wait and see. Everything will be set right in three days. Aniruddha, the blacksmith, Girish, the carpenter, Tara, the barber, Patu Bayen. Even your Chiru will be forced to rub his nose and ears in the dust."

"Fine," said the doctor. "I've no objection whatsoever. But if we are to do things together we should do everything together. Whenever there is work to be done it is Doctor Jaggan and Debu Pandit. And when it's a question of votes, it's the gentlemen of Konkona."

"You and I will stand together in the next elections. From Ward No. 3. How about it?"

Debnath Ghosh was not like the other villagers. He had great faith in his own ability and intelligence. A little imagination

and a little self-interest both played a part in his confidence. He had not acquired much knowledge but he considered what he had sufficient. There was no one in the village more highly educated than he was. Not even Doctor Jaggan.

He detested Chiru's riches and beastliness with his whole heart. And the doctor's hypocritical concern for the country and his aristocratic pretensions were as ridiculous as they were unendurable. Nor did he recognise Harish Mandal's claim to have a hereditary right to leadership. Bhabesh and Mukunda spoke with the authority of their years. He could not endure that either.

Debu's disdain did not originate solely or illogically from his self-regard. He loved his village with all his heart. He had to sit by and watch it going from bad to worse day by day in front of his eyes. Chiru did exactly as he pleased because he had money and was physically very strong. And it was not Chiru alone who did this. Nobody listened to anybody or had any consideration for the good of the village or anyone in it. Traditional social customs were disappearing. When anyone died it was no longer easy to find someone to carry out the corpse. When feasts were held, a distinction was made between the rich and the poor. The blacksmith, the carpenter and the Bayen had stopped working. The midwife and the barber were defying the traditional order. Those with an income of five rupees a month were spending ten and living like babus. Land was sold to pay debts. Even household utensils were being sold, so that people could have pump shoes and good clothes. There was a hurricane lantern in every home. Cigarettes and matches were in the pockets of the young men. Nobody who went into the town came back without spending a few pice on cigarettes. Tobacco and flint had disappeared entirely. Why did people who could not do anything about even such minor matters as these, want to be leaders of the village? On the strength of what?

Debu thought of many things as he taught the boys in his school. He strove tirelessly and unremittingly to make his thoughts known, and to exert an influence. For this reason he held aloof from others. He never neglected the smallest opportunity to exercise his personality.

Thus it happened that when Doctor Jaggan took a stand against the unjust notice of the Union Board, Debu did not hesitate to join him, despite his dislike for the doctor's pretensions to superiority.

The doctor and Debnath set to work together with enthusiasm. The petition was submitted. Then they began to make plans for a fête on the occasion of the navanna. It was the first step in their plan to unify the village. They also wanted to keep people

away from Chiru Pal's house. He always worshipped the goddess Annapurna on the navanna day. The villagers were invited in the evening. They smoked, chatted and sometimes sang kirtans to the accompaniment of large double-headed drums. This year Chiru was making elaborate preparations. There was to be a grand feast to which everybody would be invited, and a troupe of travelling players had been engaged to perform scenes from the life of Krishna. These two items of information had been culled from the daily tirades of Chiru's mother. Doctor Jaggan and Debnath were arranging for an evening of music in the temple pavilion. There was a group of singers among the Bauris who knew the story of Behula. They had been invited. The evening was to be devoted to songs of the snake goddess, Manasa. Donations of rice had already been collected to provide the singers with rice wine. They were immensely pleased at the prospect.

The children bathed early in the morning. Although the weather was chilly they did not come out of the pond until its water had been churned to mud. They stood in the courtyard of the temple, warming themselves in the sun and teasing the lame Brahmin's bony horse. The navanna would not start until offerings had been made at the shrines of Siva and Bhanga Kali. Maidens in their teens, with their wet hair hanging down their backs, were placing trays on the temple porch. On each tray, arranged in a neat pattern, was set a new bowl of new rice, sugar, milk, bananas, rounds of sugar cane, chopped ginger, chopped radishes and manda. Older women also brought votive trays from homes in which there were no unmarried girls. The village priest, lame Chakravarty, lifted each tray in turn and set it before the deity. Now and then he scolded the children, "Eya-e! Eya-e!. You kids you! How wicked you are! Don't go too near. She'll split your spleens open if she kicks."

He was referring to his horse. Lame Chakravarty rode from village to village on the back of this horse, carrying out his priestly duties. On his way home he carried a large basket of fruits and sweets on his head. The horse was so well-trained Chakravarty could let go of the reins in order to hold the basket with both hands. Of course, if necessary, he could put his feet on the ground for they hung less than a foot above it.

The children were pelting the horse with bits of mud from a distance. The priest got furious. He could not think how to stop them. An elderly widow solved the problem. "Eya!" she cried as she came up with her tray of offerings, "have you

children touched that animal? You pack of heathens. Go and bathe again."

"Just look how naughty they are. And I'll get the blame if the horse kicks anybody and splits his spleen."

"Don't talk nonsense, Thakur," the lady said, "it's no bigger than a goat. Rip open a spleen? Why should the children be scolded? You yourself are sadly lacking in a sense of cleanliness. You let that animal wander, hobbling about on its forelegs. It steps on everything, garbage, leaves, filth. The other day it came to the bank of our new pond where we bathe and—it makes me sick to think of it—nibbled the grass there. And you come riding on it to act as priest to the gods."

"I give it Ganges water to drink, Aunt, I give it Ganges water. Every evening before I put it in the stable. And I touch Ganges water myself."

"That's a lot of lies."

"God is my witness. I'm speaking with my hand on my sacred thread. The horse refuses to enter the courtyard until I've given it a drink of Ganges water. It stands outside and paws the ground and whinnies."

Aunt was on the point of saying something but she suddenly became alarmed, advanced a few steps and turned aside. "Who's that walking so fast?" The shadow of someone approaching from behind had fallen at her feet and she moved aside for fear of pollution, asking, "Who is it?"

It was a married woman. She was tall and her face was veiled. She did not answer, putting her tray of offerings down in front of the priest.

"Oh! It's our blacksmith's wife. And I was wondering who it could be."

Doctor Jaggan and the pandit entered the pavilion together. They had been waiting for this. When they saw Padma come up with her tray of offerings they came forward.

"Thakur," said Debnath abruptly, "don't accept the blacksmith's offerings. We will not allow it."

The Brahmin looked into Debu's face. Then he asked, "How can that be? Unless his offerings are accepted along with everybody else's, how can he perform the ceremony?"

"The blacksmith knows best. We don't. He refuses to abide by the village rules. Why should we treat him as one of ourselves in our celebrations?"

Padma stood rigidly with her face still veiled. She betrayed no sign of perturbation. The Brahmin looked at her and said helplessly, "Then what can I do about it, Little Mother?"

"Take the tray away," Debu spoke for Padma's benefit, "go

and tell the blacksmith the villagers have not allowed you to participate in the ceremony."

Padma turned and walked slowly away. She did not touch the tray. It remained where she had put it down.

The Brahmin was distressed. "Hear me, Little Mother. Take away the tray."

"The blacksmith will be here in a minute," said Debnath, "leave it where it is. A compromise will be reached today. It's sure to be." In his heart of hearts Debnath felt a deep sympathy with the blacksmith. Aniruddha was his classmate. And, apart from that, Aniruddha was not the only one in the wrong, nor was he the first to provoke trouble. The people of the village had been unfair to him in the first instance. That fact pricked him like a thorn.

The priest did not understand very well what it was all about nor was he particularly eager to know. He was more concerned over the loss of a tray of offerings. He frowned and said, "Doctor and Pandit—"

Doctor Jaggan stopped him with a commanding gesture. He said, "Girish, the carpenter, and Tara, the barber—will not be allowed to worship here. One of us will stay here until the end of the ceremony of course but I'm telling you just in case we don't."

Chiru Pal came up at this moment and called to the priest, "Thakur." Chiru was dressed in fine silk. His manner and appearance had changed entirely. He was, on this day, a different person.

"I'm coming," the priest said, anxiously, "in not more than half an hour. Oh Pandit, Oh Doctor. Where is everybody? Why aren't they coming?"

"You can't rush things like this," the doctor said to the priest. "Everybody's coming. One by one. It won't do to skimp the work of ten for the sake of one."

"All right," said Chiru Pal, "come when you have finished with the others. I just came to remind you, Thakur." He softened his huge ugly face as far as possible and said politely, "Please come today, Doctor. And Uncle Debu, you must be sure to come too."

He did not finish what he was saying. The temple pavilion was suddenly convulsed with Aniruddha's angry shouting.

"Who is it? Who has ten heads on his shoulders? Who dares prevent me from participating in this religious service?"

Aniruddha's appearance was dismaying.

Chakravarty was completely flustered. Debu straightened up. The doctor stepped forward with the smile of a professional

consoler. Chiru Pal showed no sign of restlessness today. He stood there quietly.

"Don't shout, Aniruddha," said the doctor gently, "be quiet. Be quiet."

Aniruddha gave the doctor a bitterly sarcastic look and bent down to lift the tray of offerings Padma had left on the temple porch. Taking it in both his hands he raised it to the gods and cried in a shaking voice, "Heh, Lord Siva. Heh, Mother Kali. Partake of this offering. Partake of it. And judge me. It is for you, the gods, to judge me."

The doctor's eyes were blazing. But he could not lay hold of Aniruddha and chastise him.

Aniruddha turned round and saw Chiru Pal standing behind the doctor and Debnath Ghosh. His anger turned into an insane fury. He cried, "A broom to you rich men! A broom over the head! A broom to you educated folk. I don't give a damn for any of you. I don't care. What can any of you do to me?"

He confronted Chiru for an instant as if challenging him to a fight.

The lame priest and the old widow shuddered. They were afraid something evil would happen. Logically, Chiru Pal should have sprung on Aniruddha like a tiger. But, to everybody's amazement, Chiru Pal smiled and said, "Karmakar, you're making a mistake. I'm not in this. Not at all. I only came to call the priest."

Aniruddha did not loiter any longer. He walked away as quickly as he had come. "I know them," he muttered, "I know every one of them. They've turned pious overnight, they have. Overnight."

Chiru came out of the pavilion and turned homewards quite unruffled.

Not long afterwards the children of the Bauris, Doms and Bayens began to pass the pavilion. "Where are you going?" asked the doctor.

"To Ghosh Mashay's house," they answered. "He's invited us to partake of the offerings."

"Who? Chiru?" Since when had Chiru Pal become Ghosh? The doctor cursed him vulgarly. "He's becoming a leader of the village. Such a good man!"

Chapter 11

DEBU sat silently, thinking of many things.

The school had been held in the temple pavilion from the very first day. In the beginning the priest was the teacher. He looked after the shrines, conducted daily services and taught classes. Expenses were met from the trust land dedicated to the deities. The lands disappeared. Who knew what happened to them? People said a former steward of the zemindar had incorporated them with his own lands, after arranging for the payment of a nominal rent. It had been done so cleverly there was no hope of recovering them. Even the boundaries had been effaced. It was impossible to trace or identify them. A Brahmin priest had resided at the shrines for a long time after that. He looked after the gods, performed priestly offices in village homes and taught in the school. He had been obliged to leave some ten years ago. Under the new rule promulgated by the Education Department, he was not qualified to teach. The school had been in Debu's hands for the last three years.

Debu had attended the school as a child and studied under the priest. He remembered how he would interrupt his devotions to Bhanga Kali to cry, "Ayee! Five times thirteen is sixty-five. Six times thirteen is seventy-eight. Yes—"

Aniruddha had been his classmate. The priest used to say to him, "Karmakar, you ought to go abroad. You'll never be able to do fine work with the iron you get here. Foreign factories can make slender needles and fine pins. You should learn your trade with foreign teachers. It is not for a person like me to teach you."

Chiru was a kinsman, a nephew of a sort, though much older. At first he was in a higher class but when, after spending a couple of years in each class and taking things easy, he discovered that Debu had caught up with him and as his classmate, he left school and never came back. He had married and become a

family man, astonishing the inhabitants of the five neighbouring villages with his business acumen. Today he was a person to be reckoned with, a village leader.

Aniruddha and Chiru Pal. Together they had destroyed the village order. Girish, the carpenter, and Tara, the barber, had helped them. What had surprised Debu was that no one had protested, done anything, or suggested anything be done when Aniruddha, in arrogant violation of all proprieties, had picked up Padma's votive tray and removed it from the shrine. He had spoken to people about it himself, going from door to door. The people of the village loved him, and some respected him, but in this matter they all took the same attitude. "What can be done about it? Is there any solution? If something has to be done, do it yourself. But of course you know, don't you, it will all come to nothing? What society are you talking about? Where is it?"

There wasn't any. Debu understood. There wasn't any. The kind of person who had set up this village society in the beginning and administered it down the centuries no longer existed. The people who lived in the village now were of an altogether different sort, a poor kind of men.

Doctor Jaggan had said the other day, "Catch the blacksmith and drag him here. Let him be bound to a stake and given a few good blows."

Debnath had not been able to agree to the proposal. Shame. He admitted that the right to teach a man existed and, in certain instances, also the right to punish him in accordance with human dignity. The infliction of pain is not the only way to punish. Debu was ambitious, it was true, but in order to realise his ambitions he did not want to resort to brutality or outrage. He had a sense of idealism. It was a feeling he had cultivated carefully in his school days so that it might be the foundation of his future life. He strove to model his thoughts on the thoughts of the great and learn from his experience as they had. He had acquired certain fixed notions from experiences that had come to him in childhood, which he had examined over and over again in the light of his own intelligence but had not been able to alter.

Debu despised zemindars and moneylenders. He always saw injustice in everything they did. It had become a habit. To him the ostentation of their charity, their show of public piety, and the pomp of the religious festivals they sponsored, appeared to be penance for secret sins, sins as heinous as the slaughter of cows. There was a reason for his attitude.

When Debu was a child the zemindar had once detained his father in his office a whole day in order to force him to pay

arrears in rent. Debu, terrified, had gone to the office three times, standing outside and crying. Twice the orderlies had chased him away with threats. The third time the zemindar had sent for him and threatened to lock him up too if he came again. The orderly had taken hold of him, dragged him to a dark room and said he would be confined in it. Of course the zemindars did not have a palatial building for use as a jail at that time. They never had. They were quite small landowners. They had only tried to frighten Debu. Debu knew that now. But it did not detract one jot from his conviction that zemindars were oppressive.

In order to pay his debt to the zemindar Debu's father had borrowed money from the Mukherjees of Konkona. Three years later, on the strength of his handnote, they had brought a case against him. Debu would never be able to forget the shame of the nightmarish day they were turned out of their house and all their movable possessions, utensils, plates, glasses, cows, calves, thrown into the road after them. The zemindar released the property on being given a bond. The money the court had awarded in its decree was taken as the original loan with a promise to pay. The debt had finally been cleared by Debu, after his father's death. These zemindars never did anything illegal nor did they take a pice more than was their due according to their accounts. People said moneylenders like the Mukherjees were rare. They did not insult people or oppress them like other zemindars. As long as interest was paid regularly they made no trouble. They did not covet other people's property. Property was returned, as it had been returned in Debu's case, after dues were paid. All this was true. There was no exaggeration in it. Debu had not, however, been able to forgive the zemindar.

Another, even more bitter experience, had also been etched unforgettably in his heart. He had been one of the two best boys in the school. Bisvanath, the grandson of Mahamahopadhyaya Nyaratna of Mahagram, who studied three classes below his and was younger than him, was the other boy. The teachers hoped these two boys would brighten the reputation of the Konkona High School. But Debu had not forgotten that the affection the teachers bestowed upon him was mixed with pity while the affection given to Bisvanath was mixed with respect. The affection they showered on several Konkona boys of moderate intelligence was mixed with honour because they came from gentlemen's families. The headmaster had even flattered Chiru. For every school function Chiru's father would give him ten or fifteen seers of fish, a palm or a plum tree or anything else he required. He received regular supplies of rice, ghee, dhal and

molasses. Whenever Debu remembered the shameless greed of this teacher he felt nauseated.

The boy who was honoured more than any other in the school was the son of one of the Konkona Mukherjees. He was stupid and never obtained more than forty marks in any subject despite the efforts of three tutors. Debu had once casually remarked that no amount of beating could turn an ass into a horse. It had been repeated to the boy and he had made a row that came to the ears of the teachers. Debu was summoned to the head pandit's office and forced to apologise. "No ass, boy. No ass," one of the teachers had said. "An elephant. An elephant's calf. The gait of an elephant is a little slow, it is true. You'll understand that when you grow up, not now."

Debu understood now, in his bones. The stupid Konkona boy had passed the Matriculation Examination even though he passed in the Third Division, after failing two or three times. Now he was a member of the local Board, the President of the Union Board, a member of the District Board and an Honorary Magistrate. Every month Debu had to stand in front of him with folded hands, obsequiously, when he went to the Union Board to ask for help for the school. Chiru Pal had also recently become a member of the Union Board. Now and then he came round and questioned Debu, "How's the school getting on?"

Debu's head burned.

While teaching the boys a verse which ran

If he can write and read
He'll sit in carriages,
Ride upon a steed. . .

Debu struck his pen through it repeatedly. Then he wrote in large letters upon the blackboard:

If he can write and read
People will esteem him
Very highly indeed.

Then he told the boys the story of the great Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar.

Now and then Debu felt that if only he could occupy the chair of the President of the Union Board he would be able to show people how important the position was. How much he could do for them! He dreamed of roads, lots of good, pucca roads. Fine, red gravelled roads would emerge from every village and

meet in the central one. From there a broad highway would lead to the market town at the railway junction. Row after row of carts laden with the produce of the countryside would pass down these roads, and people would return the way they had gone, bringing home the money they had earned. Children would go to and from school. In the village itself stagnant ponds would be filled in, underbrush cleared, jungle cut. The atmosphere would be sweet and wholesome. Balsam would fill holy spots with flowers during the rainy season and marigolds would be planted in the autumn and winter. There would be flowers, flowers everywhere, filling the village with light. Deep-masonry wells in every village in the country side around would assure a good supply of clean water. No refuse heaps would deface the corner of ponds. The dark water would be clear and sparkling. Water lilies and the small white flowers of the panari would fringe the banks. There would be justice in the courts. Injustice and outrage would be firmly dealt with whenever they appeared. Debu believed he could make all this possible, given the opportunity. He could prove that any four-footed animal with a slow gait is not necessarily an elephant; it might be only an ass in silver trappings.

Debu, inspired by his dream and impelled by the strength of his indignation, would get up at such times and pace back and forth flexing his arms, closing and opening his fists, so that his muscles stood out hard and firm. A pleasant feeling of strength suffused his body and mind.

His wife was the gentlest and best of women. Her face was soft, her complexion fair and her nose turned up sweetly. The look in her eyes was of the sweetest. She was petite. Her long heavy hair covered her back. Her heart was simple and good. She had surrendered herself completely to her husband. He was a man of personality. She was always astonished when Debu was in this mood. "What's the matter?" she would ask. "You're talking to yourself. . ."

"If I were a raja. . ." Debu would answer with a laugh.

"If you were a raja?"

"You would be my rani. Yes?"

"Really?" she said doubtfully. Her astonishment was extreme.

"But you wouldn't have any jewelry even as a rani."

She looked at him spellbound.

"This raja would have a kingdom, it is true, but he would not have any revenue. A Union Board President. Do you understand?"

Dreams of high achievement and ambition are not enough by themselves to guarantee their realisation. Circumstances are

stronger. What of the environment? Debu knew it. He had made repeated attempts and been thwarted. Potatoes cannot be grown even during the Indian winter if it rains. Debu had once planted potatoes during monsoon months, selecting some high land for the experiment. The plants sprouted but withered and died afterwards. Two or three plants did survive but the potatoes were the size of peas. Locking his dreams and ambitions in his heart, Debu went quietly on with his teaching. He strove to give shape to the future in the embryo as God does. In order to carry out his task he wanted to keep himself aloof from all the small perturbations of the village. The excitement of events often, however, roused his latent ambition and undermined all his efforts.

Debu saw clearly all the faults, the inconveniences, the slovenly traits and the needs of the village. He had explored its social history and knew exactly what the duties of the blacksmith, the carpenter, the mid-wife, the barber, the priest, the watchman, the cobbler, the washerman and others were. Nobody knew better than he what they received in return for their services and where the land allotted to them lay. And he had by heart all the doings and misdoings of the Council of Five for several generations.

Debu Ghosh wondered about the temple pavilion as he sat teaching his pupils. At one time the pavilion had been the heart of village activities, the strong core of its life. Weddings, naming ceremonies, funerals, religious occasions and festivals of all kinds had been celebrated here. It was in the temple pavilion that the Council of Five held its sittings whenever the social order of the village was violated by rowdy behaviour, injustice or sin. Cases were judged and punishment meted out. A shout from the pavilion could be heard in every house in the village for it was situated exactly in the centre. Nobody could ignore such a summons. Debu still remembered a time when everyone who passed the pavilion bowed. People didn't do it any more. Debu felt, now and then, that men had set their feet on a downward path out of perversity because they had lost their ancestors' respect for the gods. Debu himself bowed to the ground three times a day, as if to teach others by his example.

Debu had been profoundly influenced in a strange way by an incident which took place when he was very small. What he knew was hearsay. It concerned Bisvanath's father, Pandit Sasi Sekhar. Sasi Sekhar was the son of the saintly Nyaratna of Mahagram, yet he had turned an atheist, losing his faith in the gods entirely as a result of his study of English, a study he had

undertaken against Nyaratna's wishes. Sasi Sekhar had organised a Conference of Brahmins. Nyaratna shuddered when, at the outset of the meeting, he consecrated a stone to Narayan and then refused to worship it. He went even further and dared to debate with his father, using all the weapons in an atheist's armoury to support his arguments. The Conference broke up. The distraught Sasi Sekhar threw himself in front of a train. Debu saw in the story the just punishment for the violation of the law of Karma. Debu was all the more distressed when Bisvanath became an atheist like his father, although he knew all the facts of the case. Bisvanath was studying for his M.A. in Calcutta. He always came to see Debu when he visited his home. Bisvanath had remained Debu's friend in spite of his higher education. Their friendship had started at school. Five or six years younger than Debu, they had been bracketed together as the two best boys in the school. Bisvanath at first addressed Debu as Debuda, treating him like an elder brother. Debu, as he grew older, became more and more aware of the social difference between them and protested, "Don't treat me like an elder brother any more, Bhai. It's an offence for me to allow it," he said. From then on Bisvanath had addressed him as an equal, Debu Bhai. Now they were just friends, real friends. Debu never felt the slightest prick of superiority in his company. Bisvanath did not bow when he came to the pavilion nor did he say any evening prayers.

Debu told Bisvanath about his dreams for the restoration of the temple pavilion to its former glory and asked him for suggestions. "It can't be done, Debu Bhai," Bisvanath answered with a smile, "the pavilion has grown old. The time has come for it to die."

"Grown old? To die? What do you mean?"

"I mean that a building grows old just as a man grows old. How old is the temple pavilion anyway?"

Debu looked up at the roof. "Are you suggesting it should be torn down and rebuilt?" he asked.

"An old man doesn't become a boy if he is dressed in baby clothes," Bisvanath answered, laughing. "This temple pavilion is of no use today. Can you start a co-operative bank? Why don't you start one here, in that room? You'll find people will come and go all day and night. They'll sit here all the time."

Then Bisvanath had tried to explain to Debu, using a great many choice arguments, that money is everything. Money considerations had been at the root of the old religion-based society too, he said, though very cleverly concealed. The source of the money had dried up and the traditional treasury was empty. That was the real reason for the present state of things.

"No—no—no," Debu protested over and over again.

Bisvanath had smiled.

"Bisu Bhai, shame on you!" Debu had protested sharply. "You're the grandson of Nyaratna Mashay. It's unbecoming for you to say such things. You ought to expiate for this sin."

Bisvanath laughed a while longer and then said, "I'll send you some books, Debu Bhai. Read them."

"No. It's a sin to touch such books. Don't send any to me."

Debu clung desperately to his own faith. He wanted to re-establish it. That was why he had supported Doctor Jaggan's attempt to punish Aniruddha by denying him the right to offer worship at the pavilion on the navanna day. The amazing thing was that not a single person had backed them. And Aniruddha himself had picked up the votive tray and taken it away without any hesitation. Aniruddha's father and grandfather would never have done such a thing.

For some days Debu pondered in a bewildered way. Sometimes he thought the gods would bestir themselves and manifest their power and splendour. They would destroy injustice and establish a rule of order and right. He recalled the teaching of the shastras. But, surprisingly, he grew despondent again in a very short time.

Debu was sitting alone in the temple pavilion thinking these things after school when some one called to him from the road: "Pandit Mashay."

"Who is it?"

"What are you thinking about, sitting there all by yourself?"

It was Durga of the Bayens who was on her way to sell milk.

Debu frowned. "Why do you ask? What's it to you?"

He did not like Durga. She was a prostitute, a fallen woman, a sinner, and she was intimate with that Chiru. He despised her.

"It may be nothing to me," Durga smiled, "but it is something to your wife. Sister Bilu is standing at the door, waiting for you".

"That's so," Debu came to himself suddenly and rose. Oh! It was late. He hurried home. His good little wife said, "Your meal is ready. Have your bath." This was Debu's greatest asset; he was happy in his home. No disagreement ever disturbed the peace of his family. Perhaps that was the reason why he did not grow tired of seeking out conflicts in the village and trying to settle them.

Durga stood in the road for a long time after Debu left, staring down the way he had gone. She liked the teacher; she liked him very much indeed. For Chiru she felt only contempt.

She had not told anyone about the fire, but she had broken with him. She had liked the pandit, however, even when she was most intimate with Chiru. She liked him much more than Chiru. But, surprisingly, there was no conflict between her feelings for the two men. Today she liked Debu better than ever.

Chapter 12

THE festival of the Iti Lakshmi is held on the last day of the month of Agrahayan. In some parts of Bengal the Iti begins on the last day of Karttik and ends on the last day of Agrahayan. It is also called the Mitra Brata. The Iti which originated with the worship of the sun assures a bountiful winter crop. In Debu's village where winter crops were not extensively cultivated, it was not the custom to worship the sun for a whole month. The village grew mainly rice, the threshing, winnowing and storing of the grain beginning with the Iti Lakshmi. It takes place in the farmers' houses. A stout bamboo pole is planted in the centre of the threshing floor and white designs painted in rice paste around its base. Offerings are made there. Later, the grain is spread around the pole in a large circle. Oxen and buffaloes tied to the pole are driven over the area and their hooves separate the grain from the husk.

The temple pavilion does not have a large part to play in the Iti, but the women do not set Lakshmi in her place until they have bathed and made an obeisance there. In the old days the women used to gather there, with areca nuts in their hands, to listen to one of the older women reading or reciting stories associated with the rite at the close of the ceremonies. That practice had been discontinued and now the women met in small groups at one of the houses. Debu's house had been such a meeting place. Debu remembered it as he taught his classes. He felt hurt and frustrated and sought an opportunity to rise again. His association with Doctor Jagan had become, in the natural course, less close. He had never been able to support the doctor's penchant for submitting petitions. The very idea of a petition made him smile. Yet his heart was burning.

He read out to his class:

It does not matter to me
that I have no house of my own
and keep no servants for
I am not in need of comfort.
With a large heart I
can live quite happily
in a humble little cottage,
feasting on the bread
my own labour has won.
Not for me the life
of idleness, supported
by the labour of others.

Debu noticed a tall veiled woman. She bowed devoutly in the direction of the pavilion from the other side of the road. Apparently she deliberately refrained from entering for there was no flurry in her movements. Debu recognised Aniruddha's wife. It seemed to him her grief and pain were betrayed in every gesture she made as she bent down and rose again. She came alone and went away alone, walking slowly, as though very tired. She seemed to say, "Am I alone to blame?" Debu watched her go. He sighed. He realised a mistake had been made. It had been wrong to refuse her votive offering. The people of the village had been unjust to Aniruddha. Their injustice was far greater than Aniruddha's defiance; it was the cause of it. Aniruddha had stopped working for them because they did not give him his share of grain. Aniruddha had not left the meeting of the Council before Chiru had insulted him. Nobody had done anything to help Aniruddha recover the grain that had been stolen from his fields. Who had the right to punish him? The thread of his thoughts snapped. With surprise he saw that Aniruddha's wife was going towards his house. Why?

His pupils began to fidget. Taking the opportunity of his silence one of them said, "Sir, today is the day of the Itu Lakshmi festival. We always have a half-holiday. It's nine o'clock already."

Debu glanced at the clock he always kept near him. Then he resumed his lesson:

I am proud that, as a boy,
I learned to work in the fields.
Is that anything to be ashamed of?

He dictated the whole poem, line by line. Then he said, "Write the meaning of this poem and bring it to class tomorrow. By meaning I understand not just the meaning of the words but what you yourselves think and feel about them."

He gave the boys a half-holiday and went home. His wife was sitting in the courtyard reading the *Itu* stories. Facing her sat Padma and Durga. Debu's wife was an excellent reader. All the women in the neighbourhood came to listen to her. She had already given one reading. This was the second. Debu's baby son was lying in Padma's lap. She drew her veil when she saw Debu. His wife smiled and did the same. Durga made a show of adjusting her clothes and reseating herself. And she smiled too. Debu was in no mood to notice her. It was true that his wife read well, very well, and all the women in the neighbourhood came to listen to her but it was not to be expected that the blacksmith's wife would come. It was unnatural.

On the navanna day Debu had spoken harshly to her, ordering her to remove her votive tray. Padma had not dared to enter the pavilion, yet she had come to his house. It was most surprising. Debu stopped. Unable to address her, he spoke to Durga, "What's all this about?"

"I've come to hear my sister read the *Itu* stories," she answered. "Nobody can read better. She's the wife of a pandit, isn't she?"

"Sister?" Debu frowned. The word displeased him.

"Yes, sir, sister. Your wife is a sister to me. You are my brother-in-law." Durga laughed.

"What do you mean?" Debu was furious. His tone was sharp and hard. "How can she be your sister?"

"Well," Durga explained. "my mother's brother lives in your father-in-law's village. My uncles have grown up in your wife's house. They're old servants of the family. Sister calls them her Little Uncles. Doesn't that make her my elder sister, my Didi?"

Debu could say nothing even though the whole thing was distasteful to him. "Huh," he grunted. "Isn't she the wife of our blacksmith?" He turned to his wife.

"Yes," she answered in a low voice. Padma drew her veil farther down over her face.

"The wife of the blacksmith had not heard the *Itu* stories," Durga interposed at once. "I found her sitting glumly at home, all alone. The women of her neighbourhood go to Chiru Pal's house for the reading. She never goes there. So I asked her to come here with me."

Debu said nothing.

"She was afraid to come," Durga went on. "She was afraid you would not like it. The other day at the temple pavilion it seems you said . . ."

"Aniruddha has done very wrong," Debu interrupted.

"That's not like you, Pandit," Durga did not hesitate to rebuke him. "Was the blacksmith the only one to blame? Tell me."

Debu was silent for a while. Then he said, "That's true. I misunderstood." He took the opportunity to confess his mistake and lighten his heart even though it was Durga who pointed it out to him.

"Don't cry, Bhai, don't cry," Debu's wife spoke to Padma anxiously in a soft voice.

Padma was wiping her eyes repeatedly with the end of her sari. Debu's wife had noticed it.

"No, don't cry," Debu pleaded. "Aniruddha is my childhood friend. We went to school together. Tell him I'll go to him. I will go."

"Didn't I tell you," Durga said to Padma. "Our pandit only did that under the influence of Doctor Jaggan?"

"No, no, Durga, don't blame anyone else. The mistake was mine. I misunderstood." Debu made the confession with so much sincerity, in such an emotional tone of voice, that even Durga was silenced.

"And dear," Debu spoke again, addressing his wife, "see that Aniruddha's wife gets some refreshments before she goes."

"And what about me?" Durga demanded pertly. "Am I to be left out? You're a nice brother-in-law, I must say."

Durga's way of speaking was so sweet and teasing, her tone so disarmingly friendly, it was impossible to be angry with her even though she was a prostitute. Debu's wife smiled. Padma smiled. So did Debu. "It's not my job to worry about you," he said. "You claim to have a sister here. One's own people look after one better than strangers."

"Interest is sweeter than capital. The attentions of my sister's husband are dearer than hers. I have bad luck."

"There now, no more tomfoolery," Debu said. "Listen to the story." He entered the house with a light heart.

"The poor Brahmin felt like eating some rice cakes," Debu's wife was reading. "He sat dreaming of different kinds of cakes, cakes with coconut filling, sweet potato cakes, moongh dal and rice flour cakes."

Debu smiled to himself inside the house.

"Just wanting them was not enough. The Brahmin was poor. He had no land, no job, no great possessions. He lived from

hand to mouth and often had nothing to eat. Where was he to get rice flour, coconuts, molasses, sweet potatoes? He couldn't steal, could he? He was a Brahmin."

Debu approved the Brahmin's honesty.

"But Brahmins are clever. He thought of a way to obtain all that he needed. The month of Agrahayan was drawing to a close. Loaded carts were passing down the road from the fields to the farmers' houses. Some carts were laden with potatoes, some with pulses, some with molasses. The cart wheels had ground the dirt of the road to a fine white dust that was knee-deep. That night the Brahmin dug a large hole in the road just in front of his house and filled it with water. Every cart that passed the next day fell into the hole. The Brahmin rushed out and helped to lift each cart and push it on its way. For his services the cartmen paid him in kind: some gave him a little grain, others a few pulses or potatoes or some molasses. In this way the Brahmin obtained what he required. Then he said to his wife, 'Now make the cakes.'"

Debu laughed aloud. The Brahmin's resourcefulness delighted him. His laughter stopped the reading. "What are you laughing at, Pandit Mashay?" Durga asked from the courtyard.

"The Brahmin's resourcefulness," he answered, coming out.

"Please let me finish the story," his wife said, drawing her veil a little lower.

"All right, all right," said Debu as he went out

Debu, contented and happy, came down into the road. Farmers were coming home from the fields. It was time for the noonday meal. The hired hands ate in the fields. Their women passed, carrying their meals tied up in small red towels on their heads. In one hand they carried small pots of drinking water and in the other large, flat baskets pressed against their waists. While the men ate, they gathered twigs and branches for firewood and any grain that had dropped in the fields or by the wayside.

Three or four loaded carts were entering the village. The dust of the road was already as fine and white as flour. The sunlight was as pale as the complexion of an old man, tinged with yellow. The dust that rose from the wheels of passing carts made the light paler still. The dark glossy leaves of the ancient bokul at Shashtitola were coated with dust, and the pavilion was wrapped in a mantle of dust. Debu had returned to it. He felt a deep affinity with the place.

"Grandson, is school over?" the cracked voice of an old woman called from the road. "It seems very quiet."

"Oh, Ranga Didi, come up. Come up. Today is Itu Lakshmi day. We have half the day off." Debu raised his voice to greet her.

The old woman, broom in hand, entered the pavilion. She had just rubbed herself with oil and her skin gleamed. Ranga Didi to the whole village, she was Bhalo Pishi or the Good Aunt to the elders. Ranga Didi had grown up in the village. She was childless and kinless. Ranga Didi was short of hearing and her eyesight was dim. But though she was over seventy, her body was still strong, and she still stood very straight. Ranga Didi's name was appropriate. Her complexion was still fair and her skin sleek. People said the old lady kept herself that way by applying tamarind paste every two or three days to her body. Twice a day she massaged herself with a full cup of oil. She applied tamarind paste every other day or two. "You use soap, don't you?" she said. "why can't I use tamarind paste?" Ranga Didi swept the temple pavilion every morning before going to bathe in the pond. This was her daily task.

"Itu Lakshmi. Half-school. Is that it?" She began sweeping straight away. "How many songs I've heard in this pavilion, grand-son! Nilkantha, Yoginder, Moti Ray, Nathar. The troupes of travelling players and singers used to be big ones. Kirtan. Panchali. How many functions were held here! You haven't seen much, I must say. It's no longer the same. Ram is no more and Ayodhya has changed. In the old days a man was paid good wages to keep the pavilion clean. How it sparkled and shone!"

The old woman mumbled to herself. All her memories of happiness and splendour centred on this pavilion. Whenever she came here she reminisced, talking to herself. "How big the meetings were! All the important people came. Justice was done. The rights and wrongs of a case were carefully discussed. But, of course, women couldn't take a step. My goodness. How the men shouted if they tried to!"

"Nobody will keep it clean when you're gone, Ranga Didi," Debu sighed.

"Mother Kali or Father Siva will have to make some arrangement, Bhai," said the old woman, her broom stopping for a minute.

After a brief silence the old woman went on, "When I die, Bhai, please lay me out here in the pavilion."

"I'll do that, Ranga Didi," Debu promised and then teased, "you must leave us some of the money you have buried. We'll use it to repair the pavilion."

The old woman would have been furious if anyone else had said that. She would have started heaping curses on his head

and ended up in tears. But Debu was different. The old woman could not be angry with him. "Do you say that too, grandson?" she cried. "How much money can a body save selling milk and cowdung chips or gathering cow dung? I have to eat, haven't I? Answer me."

She began to ply her broom swiftly. She did not want to discuss money any more. The mention of money frightened her. Some night she might be murdered and all she possessed stolen. It was true the old woman had money. She had buried it in two or three places. Two hundred and five rupees in all.

Placid, slow-moving life of the village. The number of people on the roads had already dwindled. An occasional cart was still lumbering in from the fields. Debu sat idly in the pavilion. He had nothing to do. In another month the grain would be safely stored away and still fewer carts would pass. Debu recalled what Bisvanath had said, "Life in our village rides in ox carts. That's why it does not change. The pace of life is slow, the pace of oxen drawing heavy carts. In other countries tractors are being used to plough the land, tractors and other machines."

It was certainly true that village life moves at an ox cart's pace but Debu did not agree with Bisvanath even though the creaking of the wheels was a continuous and monotonous plaint.

Bhupal Bagdi, the watchman, came up and bowed to Debu. "Pranam, Pandit Mashay," he said. A veiled woman carrying an earthen pot was standing behind him.

"Bhupal?" Debu asked absent-mindedly.

"Yes, Mashay. I've come to have the pavilion plastered with cow dung. Here now, you, start from the other side."

The woman was carrying cow dung in her pot. She started to smear it over the floor. Bhupal was the official watchman and the zemindar's henchman as well. Three times a year, at the beginning of the months of Aswin, Paush and Chaitra, his duty was to see that the floor of the pavilion was neatly plastered with cow dung. This was one of his five duties as the zemindar's henchman.

"You're following the example of Hari Thakur," Debu laughed. "It's not Paush yet. Hari Thakur was priest to all the five villages. He spent a day in each, performing services for five days. He came once every five days."

Bhupal laughed at the joke. "Our Yuddhistir does something like that. Watchmen are supposed to leave the house in the evening and shout three times in the course of the night. He goes out, gives three shouts, and comes in again to sleep."

Debu laughed aloud.

"I don't do that, Pandit Mashay," Bhupal said, "the gomasta has arrived today."

"So early in the year?"

"Yes, Mashay. He's early this year. The Settlement has come. That's why."

"Settlement Camp?"

"Yes, sir. Twenty or thirty cartloads of tents and things. The surveying is to start from the 7th of Poush. It's to be announced by beat of drum this evening. I have to go after supper."

"Settlement survey? The grain is still standing in the fields. Are they going to drag their iron chains over it and trample it under their boots in order to measure the land?"

"The grain will be threshed in the fields this year, Pandit Mashay," Bhupal said.

Debu frowned and stood up. "This is all wrong. It's unfair."

Chapter 13

"SHE who keeps the Itu Lakshmi day will be as lucky as Siva's wife, Ishani. Her fields will brim with the abundance of her crops, wheat, rice, barley, mustard, sesamum, chhola. There will not be enough bins to hold it all. Every handful taken up will turn into two. Mother Lakshmi will reside permanently in her storehouses and fields. The home will fill with children and grandchildren, the cowshed with milch cattle and calves. There will be fish in the ponds and fruit on the trees, cowries in Lakshmi's holy pot. Gold and silver will shine on the eight parts of her body. When the time comes for her to pass away, her sons and daughters-in-law shall be with her and grandchildren will stand at her bedside. She shall die with her head in her husband's lap and Ganges water on her lips."

The story came to an end. Debu's wife raised her voice in the warbling trill with which all auspicious occasions are marked in Bengal, and bowed to the ground. Padma and Durga did the same. Durga's tongue was as light and volatile as her voice was high. Her trilling filled the house. She bowed, put her areca nut down in front of Debu's wife and said laughingly, "Bilu

"No, why should I?"

"No, drop it here!"

"Drop it then! Throw it down! Dust! He licks leaf plates from garbage piles! Dust!" Durga's voice rasped.

Padma did not drop it. She found a clean spot and set the sweetmeat down on it carefully. Then she looked at the boy and smiled encouragingly. She walked away without saying anything.

"Blacksmith's wife," Durga called her gaily

Padma habitually walked with her eyes on the ground and her veil drawn low over her face. "What is it?" she asked, without raising her head.

"Look over there."

"Where? Where?"

"In front of you," Durga laughed shortly.

Padma lifted her veil slightly, raised her head and looked around. Then she dropped it quickly. Chiru Pal was sitting at the door of his granary, directly in front of her. With him was a man with thick round eyes and a huge mustache. The two men were looking in their direction. Padma recognised the zemindar's revenue collector the gomasta, as the second man. She walked on swiftly. She was in a hurry to get past but Durga did not change her pace. She walked with her usual slow, swinging gait.

The gomasta looked first at Durga and then at Srihari. "Who was that with Durga, Pal?" he asked.

"Aniruddha's wife."

"Huh, why is she going around with Durga?"

"How do I know what goes on in other people's minds? Aren't others' thoughts dark to us?"

"What does Durga say? Does she-?"

"I've given up all that. Das Mashay," Srihari said solemnly. "I don't even speak to Durga any more."

"How's that?" Das's eyes popped with surprise.

"Yes. Mashay."

"All of a sudden? What happened?"

"Nothing. Low company is bad company. People make fun of you and look down on you. It's demeaning."

"That's all very well. But the company of the blacksmith's wife is not so low. When you've made up your mind to get the better of him, why don't you spoil his nest?"

Srihari said nothing. The fires of his lust smouldered in his breast. A flame shot up at the smallest movement.

Das laughed hysterically.

Srihari's ugly eyes flared. This tall, dark woman attracted him strongly. He desired her with all the naked longing of his heart. He remembered the veiled face he had seen as she stood on the

bank of the pond, her large eyes, the heavy black hair that fell over her small forehead, the gently curved nose, a large mole on one cheek, the glint of the whetted knife in her hands. He even remembered the row of small beautiful teeth that showed when she had smiled with cruel pleasure.

"Who will enjoy her if you don't? Any Ram or Shyam? Aren't you one of fortune's chosen few?"

Srihari was silent a long time. Then he took a deep breath, like a python. "Let's not talk of that, Dasji. What are you doing about what I just spoke of?"

"How long does it take to delete Pal and substitute Ghosh? But you know of course what the zemindar's office is like. It's pay your pice and take your oil. There'll be fees. And my dues. And a feast." Das looked into Srihari's face. "Have you given up drink too? The way you're going—" Das twisted his lips and smiled.

"Oh, no, you'll get all that. The thing is, I don't do it openly any more. Quietly. In my own room. Now and then . . ."

"Like a gentleman. That's right." Dasji nodded vigorously, "A hundred times. How often I've told you what you were doing wasn't becoming in a gentleman. It's fine you've stopped it. Right."

"I thought it over, Dasji," Srihari admitted freely. "It is not possible to rise in people's estimation that way. Those days are gone."

"That's never been the way." Dasji was a shrewd and experienced agent of the zemindar. "It's never been the way. You talk about Tripura Singh. People still call him a dacoit. Does that show any respect? Take the Mukherjees of Konkona. Nobody thought of them as gentlemen even after they had grown rich. Then they founded a school and a hospital and built a temple. People at once began to sing their praises. They became not only gentlemen but grand gentlemen. The eldest became the Boro Babu of the Big House, almost a title."

"I plan to repair the pavilion and have the floor cemented, Dasji. And I'm going to have a well dug beside it."

"Fine. Fine. Put inscriptions on the well and the pavilion floor: "Built by the devout Sri Srihari Ghosh." Your surname will be firmly established as Ghosh."

"But you must do what I've asked you to. Ghosh must be entered in the Settlement Records too."

"Tomorrow. Tomorrow. It'll be done tomorrow."

The surname by which Srihari's family was known was Pal. He wanted to change it. He himself had been writing Ghosh for a long time. But he could not use Ghosh in the courts. It was for this reason he wished to have his name changed to Ghosh

in the zemindar's records. A new land survey was being made by the Government. It was a good opportunity to have his name entered as Ghosh in the record of rights that was being compiled. Pal is a much less respected surname than Ghosh. People who work on the land themselves are called Pal. It is a peasant's name.

"And what are you doing about that other thing?" Dasji asked.

"What? The blacksmith's wife—?"

Dasji burst out laughing. "Do I have to ask about that? That's a sure thing. I was referring to the gomasta's job."

"All right." Srihari agreed apologetically. He was embarrassed. "I'll think about it."

Tara, the barber, came up just at this moment, carrying the tools of his trade. "My pranams, Mashay," he said with a gentle smile and obsequious manner.

"Come, tell us the news." Dasji looked up at Tara and drew his attention to his forehead.

"I've been to Konkona," answered Tara, scratching his head. "Mother told me you had come as soon as I returned. So I hurried here at once." He smiled ingratiatingly.

This smile was a part of Tara's stock in trade. People who are not given precedence easily lose their tempers. Tara put them in good humour by this polite and merry smile. He used it in all circumstances, even ironical or punitive ones. He also used another trick of his trade cleverly. People are infinitely curious about the secrets of their neighbours. He went from house to house around the village and countryside all morning. Ram's secrets were judiciously disclosed to Shyam and Shyam's to Jadu. And he entertained Madhu so well with tales of Jadu that Madhu was put in an excellent temper. Tara took the opportunity to observe his household too.

"There's a lot of excitement in Konkona," he began as he poured water into a bowl. "Eight or ten tents are already up. Cartloads of papers. Yes, Mashay."

"Huh. It's the Settlement Camp."

The cunning barber at once sensed the news did not please the gomasta. He glanced at Srihari. Srihari also was glum. Tara changed the subject instantly. "Durga will be making money with both hands. What a crowd of pomaded surveyors I saw! Do you understand, Pal Mashay?"

"Pal? Have you no manners? Can't you use the polite form of address?"

"Mashay?"

"Say Ghosh Mashay. Pal is the surname of people who work on the land. Srihari is one of the chief men in this village."

Tara Charan began to listen in silence. He learned many things. He even gleaned from the hints dropped that Srihari was soon to become the gomasta of the village. "There's nobody like Ghosh Mashay in this part of the country," he immediately chimed in. Drawing the razor over the gomasta's cheek he added in a low voice, "He can get twenty like Durga if he wishes."

Dasji raised his hand and stopped him with a gesture. Then he asked softly, "Why is Aniruddha's wife going around with Durga these days? Can you tell me?"

"Is she? I'll find out today. Of course Karmakar and Durga are quite friendly—" Tara Charan laughed.

"Really?"

"Yes."

Srihari had been sitting quietly. He did not like Padma to be discussed in this manner. He was deeply and strongly drawn to her and he wanted her for himself alone. In some lonely place. Like stolen goods. In the quiet of a dark hole he would wrap her in his coils like a snake and enjoy her.

When Durga reached Padma's house the latter was coming out with a towel over her shoulder. Durga had hidden in a narrow lane after Padma had gone on. She knew the gomasta very well and there was nothing about Srihari she did not know. She wanted to learn what they were up to this time. She smiled at what the gomasta said but she was surprised at Srihari. When the barber came, Durga left. "Another bath?" Durga asked.

"Yes."

"Have you stepped on anything dirty? What baths you take! It's not surprising you're easily—"

"No. I haven't stepped on anything." Padma was embarrassed.

"Then?"

"The boy soiled my clothes."

"You pick up every child you see. It's a bad habit you have. You have no children of your own. Why do you make such a fuss over everybody else's? Whose baby have you picked up now?"

"Chiru Pal's son," Padma was more embarrassed than ever. Durga was astounded.

"His wife was standing at the head of the lane, crying. The baby in her arms was crying too. And the older child at her feet was crying to be picked up and pulling at his mother's clothes. Her mother-in-law was shouting from inside the house, 'You devourer of your own children! You've gobbled up all of

them. Why spare these two? Eat them up and get out! I'll be relieved.' So I took the youngest one. She picked up the other and soothed him." Padma was silent for a few minutes. Then she said, "Pal's wife is such a good woman. Such a good woman!" She remembered the day she had come to her house

Durga had no complaint to make against Srihari's wife. On the contrary she felt a secret guilt. Durga knew all the wives in the village hated and cursed her. Only two never spoke ill of her. One was Bilu, Debu's wife, and the other was the wife of Srihari. Debu's wife had no reason to hate her. Her husband was a good man and she had no fears regarding him. But Srihari's wife had never said anything to her in spite of her open intimacy with him. She really felt too ashamed to look her in the face.

Durga said nothing for a while. Then she changed the subject abruptly. "The sight of small children makes me sick. Who knows why?"

Padma scowled at her.

Durga did not notice. She would not have taken any notice even if she had seen her. With an oblique sharp smile she would have cut Padma's displeasure to pieces. She went on, "My sister-in-law is going to have a child. At this age! I'm already thinking how it will cry and soil itself like a baby bird. Ugh!" she said in distaste.

Padma was instantly transformed. "Which god did your sister-in-law appeal to?" She asked eagerly.

"God? God takes pity on quite a number of people." Durga smiled significantly and added, "It was Ghosal in the end."

"Does Ghosal give magic charms?"

"She's not barren. She's just intimate with Haren Ghosal. That's why she's going to have a child."

Padma stared at Durga.

"It's not always the woman's fault, you know," Durga explained. "Perhaps you don't know. Sometimes the man is to blame." She knew of many cases from neighbouring villages as well as from this one. She knew every woman who had taken this path and every detail about them. They might wish to hide themselves, moving about only in darkness, but Durga constantly came and went on the roads, peering into every veiled face as boldly as a gypsy. The roads were, in a sense, her dwelling place.

It was a winter day. The chill water pierced the skin like needles. Padma had bathed twice in the morning. She began to feel unwell. Her indisposition persisted the whole day. Even the heat of the kitchen stove could not warm her. She ate nothing.

When her cooking was done she set the food aside for Aniruddha. The blacksmith had left for his smithy in the town very early, taking his lunch with him.

When he came home in the afternoon, Padma was sitting against the wall, looking sick and weak. Aniruddha was tired. He had stopped at Durga's for a couple of drinks on his way home. "What's wrong with you?" he shouted angrily after looking at her for some time. The way she sat there and her silence made him furious.

Padma looked up at him at last.

"What's wrong with you?" Aniruddha repeated his question.

"What can be wrong with me? Nothing." She did not feel like saying she was not well. What good does it do to tell a stone you feel badly? Or to cry in a wilderness? She smiled faintly.

"Then why are you sitting there like a lovelorn Radha, staring at the lintel?" Aniruddha ground his teeth.

Padma flared up instantly. A wild spasm passed through her limp, passive body. Her large eyes reddened and she stared hotly. It seemed to Aniruddha they glowed like two pieces of red-hot iron from his forge, brighter and hotter than fire, on the point of melting. A heat as unbearable as the heat of the forge emanated from her body. This was a new Padma. Aniruddha was alarmed at the thought of what she might say or do in such a condition. But Padma did not say a word. Her fury was confined to her eyes and to her body. It was like molten metal held in a container. She sighed and stood up. Aniruddha saw that she was shaking. He ran to her in alarm and took her by the hand. "What's the matter, Padma? Padma?"

Padma seemed to try to draw herself up and shrink away from Aniruddha, but she trembled so violently she clutched at the wall, slid down and collapsed on the floor.

Aniruddha ran to Doctor Jaggan.

As he passed the pavilion he heard the doctor's loud voice and entered. Nearly every one in the village was present. The doctor was protesting. "I'll submit a petition! I'll submit a petition! I'll send a telegram to the Commissioner!"

A man wearing the uniform of a Government orderly was hanging a notice on the wall:

The Settlement Survey will start its tabulation of holdings in this village on the 7th of Poush. Every member of the village is hereby directed to be present on his own land and be prepared to produce proof of its boundaries. The work of the Survey will proceed in accordance with the law in case of default.

The village people were murmuring among themselves. They looked worried.

Srihari and the gomasta were talking with the Government peshkar. "A fish! A nice, big fish."

Debu was standing silently on one side. Aniruddha saw him. On the way back from his smithy he had heard from Durga all about the occurrences of that morning. He had always loved and respected Debu. On the navanna day he had felt hurt, not angry. His hurt had been turned into even deeper respect by what Durga had told him. His heart was full

"Debu Bhai," his voice was tremulous.

"What is it, Ani Bhai? What's the matter?"

Aniruddha burst into tears.

Debu called Doctor Jaggan. "Aniruddha's wife has fainted. Let's go at once."

"Let's go." The doctor gave Aniruddha an indignant look and came forward.

His lecture on the Settlement Survey was postponed for the time being. As they walked he began a harangue on the ingratitude of the villagers. "I'll go on doing my duty!" he said. "I'm a doctor. I'll answer every call at once. Nobody has paid a fee for three generations. I don't accept fees! Fees!" the doctor laughed. "Nobody even pays for medicine! Fees!"

"Have a cigarette, doctor," said Debu, taking one out of his pocket.

"Thank you." The doctor took it and held it between his teeth while he struck a light. "I'll show you my ledgers, Pandit. Ten thousand rupees. These people have cost me ten thousand rupees. Yet the person they respect most is the fellow who charges them interest. Chiru Pal. The Konkori gentlemen! The likes of them."

They had reached the doctor's dispensary. He fetched a bottle and said, "Let's go. She'll come to in a minute. There's nothing to fear."

Chapter 14

THE light of dawn had not yet risen in the sky when Debu left his bed. Rising at this time was a habit he had formed in childhood. Not only Debu but most of the villagers started the work of the day long before the day began. The women poured libations of water on the thresholds of the houses, cleaned them, plastered floors and courtyards with cow dung. The men fed the livestock. Work started even earlier when grain was to be husked. The rhythmical pounding of the husker broke the silence of the night. The low murmur of voices was heard and lanterns flickered back and forth. At this time of year the pounding of huskers was continuous in most of the village homes. This day they were silent. It was the *Itu Lakshmi* day. The grain would be worshipped, not pounded. On this day grain is stored away, and stock is taken.

Debu said to Bilu, "The courtyard should be plastered. The gomasta has come. Classes will have to be held here for some days."

The gomasta had come. The temple pavilion would be his office temporarily, since the zemindar was the owner of the pavilion. He administered the trust property attached to the shrines. The common people, however, enjoyed the right to use the pavilion. It had, in fact, been built by them. The villagers exercised this right, looked after its upkeep, raised donations to thatch the roof and carried out minor repairs. The pavilion was their creation. They contributed both labour and money. The zemindar of the time had given them permission. That had been long ago.

Debu bowed before the shrine as he set out for the fields. The elderly women were sprinkling libations of water on the threshold before making their obeisances. The door jamb, rotten with so much wetting, was crumbling away. Cats would get into

the shrines and eat the offerings unless they were repaired that year. Even a dog might slip under the door.

The lame priest said, "Not so much water, Mothers, not so much water. A little is enough. Too much will make your way to heaven muddy and slippery. That's why I'm telling you not to sprinkle too much. The wheels of the chariot will get stuck in the mud. They won't be able to rise up with you."

"The horses that pull the chariot aren't like that puny three-legged pony of yours, Thakur," Auntie answered. "You don't have to worry."

"My horse was foaled by one of the chariot horses, Auntie," the priest laughed. "It's true it has three legs but its parents had only two. Haven't you heard the rhyme—

The right leg is wobbly and the left leg is lame.

Such is the horse of Father Baidyath."

Doctor Jaggan used stronger language. "Thieves, cheats, rotters," he cried. "They're greedy, quarrelsome, wicked. And they come here to acquire merit! Charge a pice a day for the privilege of pouring libations on the thresholds of the shrines. Make it a rule. Not a single person will come. You'll see. Look at them. Look at the pots and pots of water they're bringing."

Debu made no comment. What the doctor said was true, true to a large extent. But Debu did not see any trace of their evil natures in the faces and eyes of the people he met in the early morning. They were quite different then from what they were at other times. They looked like pilgrims in an imaginary realm. If only they could always be like that! But the moment each set foot in his own house again he reverted to his usual self. One would pick up utensils belonging to somebody else at the washing place. Another would curse the gods for his bad luck. Somebody else would wait beside the road for the livestock dealer and sell his old cow. Everybody knew what the dealer would do with the cow, but greed for a few pieces of silver overcame all scruples. Debu sighed and came down into the road.

The cultivators were on their way to the fields, Bauris, Doms, Muchis, Bayens and others. They were smoking as they walked. Each carried a small water pipe in one hand and a sickle in the other, a cloth wrapped their shoulders, for the early morning was chilly. The harvest was in progress. Most of the farmers in the village worked in the fields side by side with their hired hands. They also passed by carrying sickles, acting according to the proverbial belief that a man who works himself and makes others work, is doubly rewarded.

Satish Bauri was something of a leader among the Bauris. He owned a plough and a pair of oxen. The land he farmed was not his, of course, and he ploughed other people's land for a share of the crop. He always spoke with a competent air. When he saw Debu he bowed to the ground and touched his feet. The others did the same.

"Are you going to the fields?" asked Debu, returning his greeting.

"Yes, sir." Satish turned to his companions, "Have you ever seen anybody as good as our pandit?" he asked. "How many babus acknowledge our greeting? The pandit always touches me on the forehead in blessing! I've never heard him speak disparagingly of us."

"What's going to happen? Tell us, Pandit Mashay," Satish stopped Debu as he was about to proceed on his way.

"Happen? Why? What's the matter?"

"About the Settlement, Mashay. What's going to happen to everybody in the village? It's to start in seven days. We'll have to be present in the fields day and night. An iron chain will be dragged over them in order to measure the land. How can the grain be harvested? Will any be left to cut after the chain has passed over it?"

"What did the gomasta say? What does Pal say?"

"Call him Ghosh Mashay!"

"Ghosh Mashay?"

"He is now Srihari Ghosh Mashay. Didn't you know? He has had his name entered in the zemindar's records as Ghosh. In the court records too. Everybody's been told to call him Ghosh Mashay."

"Oh, is that so? Well, what does Ghosh Mashay say? You went to see him yesterday, didn't you?"

"We went because they sent for us. They told us to work day and night to get the grain cut in these seven days. Is that possible? Why don't you tell us what to do, Pandit Mashay?"

Debu did not answer. He had not slept the whole night. There was no solution he could think of.

"The doctor came as I was leaving the village," Satish said. "He's submitting a petition. We are to sign. What good will a petition do, Pandit Mashay? A petition was sent when our houses burnt down. What came of it? And the Settlement Hakim may get annoyed. What then?"

In 1793 the British Government promulgated a measure known as the Permanent Settlement for Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. No survey of land was made at the time. There were endless dis-

putes over the boundaries of land holdings. Sometimes riots took place. By 1840 only the boundaries of the villages had been settled, although the survey undertaken by the Government later had lasted thirty-five years. In 1875 a new plan for Bengal was drawn up in accordance with the new Survey Act. Every plot of land was to be measured, described, and its ownership listed. The Survey reached Debu's part of the country in 1926. To the simple village folk the prospect of having their lands measured and tabulated was terrifying.

The Settlement Hakim was said to use his cane freely for the slightest offence during the Survey operations, and people were handcuffed and sent to jail.

When the work of the Survey was completed the villagers would have to pay part of the expense incurred. If they did not pay, their immovable property would be sold by auction.

The zemindar promised to raise the rent afterwards four annas to the rupee, even eight annas; an increase of a 100% was not beyond the range of possibility. There was, people said, a precedent in the High Court. Rent-free lands would be confiscated. If they weren't, cess would be demanded and the cess rate was equal to the rent rate, not less. All sorts of changes were rumoured.

When Debu returned from the fields he found a number of important people already in the pavilion. They were waiting for him. "Have you done it?" Harish asked as he entered.

The night before, Debu had been asked to draft a petition but he had not been able to do it. He didn't believe in petitions. The mention of petitions reminded him of several sad experiences.

The first incident had occurred shortly after his father's death. Debu was working on the land himself. He was fresh from school. One day, as he was ploughing, an Assistant Sub-Inspector of Police, in his khaki uniform, happened to pass that way. He called from the road, "Heh there! Come here."

Debu had not answered. The man's impolite way of speaking and rude manner offended him.

"Heh! You ape!"

Debu did not answer this time either. He had submitted his first petition. The petition was addressed to the Police Superintendent. An inquiry was held two months later. The Inspector came in person to conduct it.

He heard what Debu had to say and settled the matter with a few gentle words. "See here, son," he said, "the Assistant Sub-Inspector is your father's age. You ought not to mind if he uses the familiar form of address. Of course he should not have called you an ape, if he did."

"He did."

"Where are your witnesses? Tell me."

There had been no witnesses. "Now then, my boy," said the Inspector, "you may go. You ought not to take offence."

Debu's anger was not appeased.

The second occasion on which he had submitted a petition was strange. The zemindar decided to net the fish in the khash pond. It was the month of Baishakh, and the hot season had begun. That was the only pond with fit water to drink. Although the water level was already low, the zemindar planned to drain part of the water away in order to facilitate the catching of the fish. The villagers shuddered when they heard what was to be done. How much water would be left for them? Only a morass of mud. What would they drink?

"The zemindar needs fish," said the gomasta. "Where else can he get it?"

The villagers went to the zemindar. "Either give me the fish," he said, "or pay me the price of the fish."

Young Debu sent his petition to the District Magistrate. Nothing came of it. The zemindar's men arrived in a body, dragged their net through the water, and turned the pond into a mud hole. Debu was so distressed he did not know what to do. Seven days later the village was electrified by the sudden arrival of a young gentleman in Western clothes. With him came the watchman, constables and police officers. The head constable called Debu. "The Magistrate Saheb Bahadur wishes to speak to you," he said.

Debu was thunderstruck. Had the Magistrate himself come? What could he do now? Debu greeted the Magistrate. The Magistrate returned his greeting. Debu was astonished by his courtesy.

"Are you Debnath Ghosh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Say: 'Yes, Your Honour,'" the head constable interposed.

"Don't bother," the Magistrate laughed. Then he heard the whole story. He went to see the pond himself. The state of the water shocked him. Debu still remembered the tears that welled up in his eyes. He wiped them away with a handkerchief and said, "It's too bad, Debu Babu, I haven't been able to do anything."

"I sent the petition eight or nine days ago, sir." Debu answered.

"The post took one day and, for some reason or other, it was not put up to me on time. I'll enquire into that." After a short silence the Magistrate Saheb said, "Debnath Babu, if any more cases of this kind occur don't send any petitions. Come in per-

son. Come straight to me and tell me about it. Petition!" the Magistrate smiled.

The Magistrate sanctioned the construction of a well for the village. But the Konkona members of the Union Board took advantage of the young gentleman's transfer from the district and had the well dug in another village.

Petition. Debu remembered a story. A fire broke out in a certain Raja's palace, while he was away in Darjeeling. A telegram was sent to him as no provision for the purchase of pails and buckets in the event of fire breaking out had been made. Twenty-four hours later the necessary sanction arrived from the Raja. He smiled bitterly. Petition! He also remembered the Magistrate Mr. A. K. Hajara, I.C.S. Debu respected him.

"No, Uncle Harish. I haven't drawn it up."

Harish, Bhabesh and the other elders present were dissatisfied by his reply. "You said you'd do it. You took it on yourself. Everybody will come to sign it after they'd had something to eat. And now you say you haven't written it. Why didn't you say you couldn't do it? The doctor would have done it."

"That's right" Bhabesh agreed. "Plain speaking spares trouble. If only you had told us we'd have made some other arrangement."

"Oh, Uncle Bhabesh, I'll write the petition for you right now. But can you tell what good it will do?"

Everyone was silent. "What shall we do then?" asked Harish. "Surely something has to be done. What consolation will we have?"

"Would you like a suggestion?"

"What is it? Tell us."

"Let us call the people of all the five villages together. Then we can go in a body straight to the District Magistrate."

"Do you think it will do any good?"

"It'll certainly be better than sending a petition." A murmur arose as they discussed the matter among themselves.

The school boys had begun to appear. They took their places. "Are you all here?" asked Debu. "Sit down and study a little while," he said. "Have you written out the meaning of the poem I taught you yesterday? Bring me your notebook. Put them down."

"Debu," Uncle Harish called.

"Yes, sir."

"Let's do that. What do you say everybody?" Harish looked around him questioningly.

Bhabesh stood up enthusiastically. "Let's go," he cried. "Take the name of Hari. The Sahab won't eat us up alive, will he? I'm

ready. Let everybody speak for himself. Are you willing to go or not?"

The excitement was general. Everybody felt it. Haren Ghosal was more excited than any of the others. "I'm ready," he cried. "Let it be decided one way or another."

"Good then. We'll go."

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" a chorus of assent rose.

"But—" Bhabesh remembered something.

"But what?" asked Harish. "Why are you hesitating again?"

"Shouldn't we look at the almanac? What kind of day " Everybody immediately agreed with him.

"You may follow the almanac," Debu said sharply, "but the government is not guided by it. What if there's no auspicious day for the next fortnight?"

"Damn your almanac," cried Ghosal agitatedly. "That's all bogus."

"People attend court on inauspicious days when they're summoned, don't they?"

"That's true," admitted Harish. "There is no almanac in the citadels of government."

"If we start early enough," said Debu, "we can arrive by ten o'clock, in time for the opening of the courts. Take your lunches with you, whatever you can, puffed rice, molasses, flattened rice. It's only for a day."

Dasji, the gomasta, and Srihari Ghosh entered the pavilion at this juncture. With them was Bhupal and several others. One of them was the local mason, Khokan Bairagi.

"Have you all gone back to school with Debu Pandit?" Dasji smiled. "What's this all about?"

Haren Ghosal spared the others the embarrassment of having to answer by speaking up himself. "We're going to the District Magistrate tomorrow. The Survey must be postponed until the grain has been cut."

"How many heads do you have, Ghosal Mashay? Two or four?" Dasji's eyebrows danced up and down. The way he spoke surprised Ghosal into silence. Then he recovered himself and cried, "Is that the way you speak to a Brahmin?"

Dasji did not answer. He took the newspaper Srihari was carrying and opened it. "Look at this," he said. "Don't jump too much. Jitendralal Banerjee has been arrested for obstructing the work of the Settlement Survey. Take it. Read it." He tossed the news-sheet into the centre of the group.

Ghosal picked the paper up, ran his eyes over the head-lines and exclaimed, "My God!" He held it out to Debu. His face was pale. Debu began to read it.

Srihari said, "You've done this without consulting me. You're

welcome to. But I can't help worrying about you. Don't do what you've planned. Heads are not harder than stone. It'll be better to go to the Settlement Hakim. We can go this afternoon. Dasji will go. I'll go. Some of you important people may come with us if you like. We'll take presents with us. A good dali. A good big fish has been caught. Uncle Harish, do you understand? It weighs twelve seers." Srihari turned to Dasji, "Has anyone gone for those—er—chicken? We'll try to come to some agreement. And that—er petitioning and going to the District Magistrate—is a kind of obstruction. Obstructing the work of the Settlement Survey. That will only get us into more trouble than ever. It won't help us."

Debu handed the news-sheet back to Ghosh and resumed his teaching. He wrote on the blackboard. "If a maund of milk costs five rupees ten annas—"

The elders were talking among themselves in low voices. Haren Ghosal's voice was audible over the others. "It's very good advice," he was saying, "very good advice."

"Take hold of the rope. Hold it," Dasji spoke to the mason. "Bhupal, you take hold of the other end."

Khokan Bairagi came forward. He was holding a length of rope made from the nests of weaver birds. He bowed to the ground before the deities and stood up. Folding his hands he asked, "Shall I begin?"

"Take the name of Durga," Dasji said. "Do you hear, Harish Mandal Mashay, Bhabesh Pal? The floor of the pavilion is going to be cemented. Kindly grant permission."

"Cemented? Made pucca?" every one present was surprised.

"Yes. And a well will be dug here, at Shasti Tola. Ghosh Mashay, our Srihari Ghosh is having these things done for the good of the village."

"Kindly grant permission." Srihari Ghosh stood before them with folded hands.

"A long life to you, son. That is what we need!" Harish cried, "Why should Mother Shasti still be allowed to lie in the dust? Build a shrine for her."

"It'll be done," declared Srihari. "I hadn't quite realised how holy Shasti Tola is."

"Now, Srihari," Harish looked at the others, "we'll do as Dasji suggests, won't we, everybody?" Srihari's magnanimity won instant support.

Srihari's uncle, Bhabesh, was suddenly so overcome with pride in his nephew that he almost broke down and wept. "Good will come of this. Good will come of this," he said, rising and placing his hand in blessing on Srihari's head. Srihari touched his feet.

"He'll die," whispered Ghosal, "Chiru's sure to die. It's not a good sign---this sudden change. Delirium. It's delirium."

The meeting broke up. The workmen were also given a tiffin break. Debu let his pupils go. "Classes will be held at my house from tomorrow," he said. "Remember. You must all go there."

"We'll come back to the pavilion when it's been repaired, won't we, Pandit Mashay?"

"Of course. Go now. Today's a holiday."

He stood up. Old Dwarka Chaudhury tapped with his cane as he entered. "Chaudhury Mashay, so late?" Debu greeted him.

"Yes, I'm late. I couldn't come earlier. There was a petition to be signed?"

"Your trouble's for nothing. There is no petition." Debu smiled.

"So I heard on my way here," answered Chaudhury. "I heard there was talk of going to the Magistrate. And I heard about the new proposal. We're to come this afternoon. Well, we'll go. Let's see what comes of it."

"I'm not going, Chaudhury Mashay," Debu said.

The old gentleman looked into his face. "Let people do what they think best, Pandit. Don't feel badly about it."

Debu forced a laugh.

"Come along. I'm thirsty. Can you give me a drink of water?"

"Of course. Do come. Please." Debu carefully led the way.

"Nothing will come of it, Pandit," Chaudhury said as they walked along. "There was a time when I too was well off. The dais of those days were sumptuous affairs. Not many are sent to people nowadays. The custom is on the decline. It produces no results. I've seen enough to know that. It might have done some good for us to go directly to the Magistrate as you suggested—" the old gentleman did not have the courage to state emphatically that it would have done good.

"They've no steadiness of purpose and no guts, Chaudhury Mashay," Debu sighed. "They're not men." He could not control himself. Tears welled up in his eyes. He wiped them away and said, "You know, if everybody of importance in all the five villages had gone to the District Magistrate in a body, he would certainly have done something for us. He would have listened to what we had to say—"

"You're grieving for nothing, Pandit," old Chaudhury smiled.

"How can I help being sorry?"

"I'll tell you a story. Come on."

"It was a long time ago," Old Chaudhury began after he had taken a drink of water, eaten a few banana cakes and begun

smoking. "I went to the Kumbha Mela at Prayag with the Thakur Mashay of Mahagram for a holy bath. The different kinds of ascetics I saw there amazed me. Naga sanyasis with no clothes on at all, others lay buried in sand up to their chests. Some reclined on iron spikes. Still others stood with one arm raised. One or two sat in the centre of a circle of fires. It seemed to me that heaven must surely be within their grasp. When I said as much to Thakur Mashay, he answered me with a story:

The Satya Yug had barely begun. Man was newly created. Everyone was good. Men lived in the forests, building huts of leaves for their dwellings. They lived on fruits, berries and wild honey, passing their time in the worship of God. They were happy and blessed, living in peace and friendliness with one another. Mother Lakshmi was in Vaikuntha, Annapurna in Kailash. Gold and silver were unknown. Even grain was unknown in the world of men. A generation passed. Untimely death did not occur. Therefore when the time came for men to die the whole generation of men prepared to go to heaven. They had lived a thousand years. They decided to make the journey together.

Slowly long lines of men made their way up the Himalayas. They passed Badra Ashram like rows of ants. The doorkeeper of heaven saw the thousands and thousands of men advancing and took fright. They were making a good deal of noise. The doorkeeper hurried to the King of the Gods, Indra. "Your Majesty," he cried, "we are in great danger."

"Why? What's the matter?"

"Hundreds and thousands of strange creatures are advancing on heaven like long lines of ants. Perhaps they are demon soldiers."

"Demon soldiers?"

Heaven was instantly mobilised. Devarshi Narada presented himself to Indra and said, "These creatures are not demon soldiers, Your Majesty. They are men."

"Men?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, men. No divine weapon will avail against them. They are sinless. Weapons will turn into flowers as soon as they touch their bodies."

"What shall we do? If so many men come here—" Indra could not complete his sentence. He was afraid they would claim his throne.

"Come. Let's go to Narayan."

Narayan laughed. "Let's have a look at them," he said. Then he sent for Mother Annapurna.

Annapurna built a palace beside the road up which the men would come. She filled its storehouses with every kind of food in abundance. "You're weary with travelling," she said to men as soon as they began to reach the palace. "Rest here for a day. Be my guests."

The men looked at each other. The aroma of delicious cooking came to their nostrils. Some of them resisted, saying, "There's no rest on the way to Heaven." These went on without stopping. Those who stayed ate so much they lay inert, unable to move. "Mother," they asked the goddess, "if we stay here with you, will you feed us like this every day?"

"Of course," answered Annapurna. They stayed.

Narayan sent Lakshmi next. Lakshmi's palace was built of gold and silver. The paths were of gold, the divans of gold. Even the dust of the ground was gold. Men were dazzled by the spectacle.

"All this for you, my sons," said the goddess. "Come in. Come in. Enter the palace."

Some of the men entered.

Yet another palace was built by the roadside. It was surrounded by flower gardens. Birds sang in the trees. The sweetest of songs filled the air and an incomparable fragrance perfumed it. Rows of apsaras stood at the gate. In one hand they held garlands of matchless beauty and in the other golden goblets. "Come in and rest," they cried sweetly. "We are your slaves, eager to wait upon you. You are thirsty. Drink from these goblets."

The goblets contained sura, the wine of heaven. Men entered the palace in droves.

"Go and see if any men are left, Indra," said Narayan.

"No," Indra sighed with relief.

"Take a good look."

"Something is moving down there. Perhaps it is a man."

"Throw open the portals of Heaven," cried Narayan.

"Receive him yourself with a garland of parijat flowers. Honour him as you would honour me and escort him into Heaven. Heaven is blessed by the dust of his feet."

Old Chaudhury, laughed and added, "Do you know, Pandit, what Thakur Mashay said when he finished the story? He said, 'Chaudhury, some will be lured aside by the delicacies offered them by disciples, others will become abbots and enthrone them-

selves on gold and silver. Still others will be enticed away by beautiful women. Only one in a million will reach heaven.' There's nothing to grieve for, Pandit. Men make mistakes at every step they take. You are sorry they are not proper men. Is it so easy to be a man? Now then, it's time for me to go. There's the doctor. He'll delay me longer unless I leave before he gets here."

Old Chaudhury went down into the road.

Debu liked the story greatly. He would tell it to Bilu that very day. Bilu had the amazing faculty of being able to remember perfectly any story she heard once.

"I know all about it," the doctor said, coming up.

"Where were you all morning?" Debu asked with a smile.

"At Aniruddha's. His wife fainted again."

"Again?"

"Yes. It was a bad fit. There was no one in the house. No child. No woman. Durga of the Bayens happened to drop in. She helped me. Aniruddha's wife may be developing epilepsy. Of course, Aniruddha thinks differently. He thinks its black magic, that somebody has cast a spell on her."

"Witchcraft?"

"Yes. He talks of Chiru Pal. Let's speak of other things. What's happened is for the best, Debu. Otherwise, the whole burden would have fallen on you and me. Have you heard of the arrest of J. L. Banerjee? We might have been arrested too. Who knows? The others would have vanished, hiding in their houses. All right. I'll be off now. Patients have been waiting for me since early morning. I must attend to them."

The doctor hurried away. Debu smiled slightly. Part of the doctor's hurry was genuine and part assumed. His concern for his patients was genuine. He was very much alive to his responsibilities as a physician. Friend or enemy, any hour of the day or night, the doctor came at once when called and took great care in the preparation of his medicines. This he did himself. But his hurry today was a little exaggerated. The arrest of J. L. Banerjee had alarmed him and he wanted to avoid discussion.

"Pandit Mashay," some one called to him from inside the house.

Debu turned around. Bilu was standing there. He pretended to scold her, "Have you done the lessons I had assigned you? Why are you laughing?"

Bilu laughed gaily. Debu went up to her. "I heard a fine story today, Bilu. You must hear it and learn it by heart."

"Stay with the baby for a minute," Bilu said, "I want to go and see Aniruddha's wife."

Chapter 15

PADMA'S fits came more and more frequently. Within a month she lost her strength and grew weak and emaciated. She was tall, and her thinness made her seem taller. Her weakness was very noticeable. It forced her to pause frequently as she went back and forth about her work. She would catch hold of something and stand still for a minute, trying to pull herself together. At such times she seemed to be trembling. Her exhaustion showed in every step she took. How strong she had been! Her feet dragged and her walk was slow and unsteady. Her large eyes glinted in her pale face like the copper eyes which decorated Aniruddha's favourite bill hook. Their gaze was unnaturally bright. Aniruddha shuddered when he looked into them.

The illness of his wife on top of the adverse turn his affairs had taken was driving Aniruddha almost out of his mind. At Doctor Jaggan's suggestion, he asked the Konkona doctor to come and see her. Doctor Jaggan had diagnosed epilepsy. The Konkona doctor said it was a form of hysteria not uncommon among childless women.

The neighbours were almost unanimous in their belief that it was a divine infliction. Nobody, they said, had ever escaped being punished for defiance of gods. The removal of the votive tray from the pavilion was regarded as a major offence. But Aniruddha himself refused to accept Padma's illness in that light. He was certain some evil person had cast a spell on her. There were still plenty of people in the countryside who knew and practised witchcraft. A friend of Chiru's, Chandra Garan-chi, was an expert at it. He could cast a spell that paralysed people. They became unable to move, like stones. Nobody agreed with Aniruddha's diagnosis but something Padma had said kept revolving in his mind.

The day that Padma had fainted for the first time she had screamed loudly in her sleep and lost consciousness again. As it

was so late in the night, Aniruddha had not sent for the doctor and how could he leave Padma alone in such a condition? When, after a long time and much trouble, Padma finally regained consciousness she had clung to him helplessly, crying, "I'm terribly afraid."

"Afraid? Afraid of what?"

"I dreamed . . ."

"What? What did you dream? Why did you scream like that?"

"I dreamed that a huge black cobra was coiling round me . . . and--"

"And what?"

"The snake had been let loose by that blackfaced--"

"Who? Which blackfaced--"

"Our enemy! Chiru Morul! He stood in the front door, laughing, after he had released the snake." Padma trembled and shook, clinging to him.

Aniruddha had not forgotten. Every time Padma had a fit he remembered. At first he had not paid much attention. The doctor was treating Padma. But little by little he became convinced that what she said was true. He now began to think of taking her to some holy place or consulting a medicine-man.

He did not tell Padma. Few people knew what he was thinking. The only person with whom he had discussed the matter was his friend Girish, the carpenter. They talked of many things as they came and went from the town. The entire village was now united against them. A consistent effort was being made to get the better of them. Aniruddha and Girish had been joined by Patil Bayen. Dasji, the gomasta, was the one who was managing everything behind the scenes, screening himself behind Srihari Ghosh whom he had set up as a village leader. Only three persons had not gone against them: Debu Fardit, Doctor Jaggan and Tara, the barber. Debu had not taken sides. Aniruddha trusted in his affection, but he did not like to bother him with his own troubles all the time. Doctor Jaggan swore at Chiru Pal day and night, but that was all, and nothing more could be expected from him.

The barber could not be trusted. His quarrel with the villagers had been settled. They had been forced to take the initiative in the matter as a barber's services are indispensable. A barber has a part to play in every village ceremony from births to funerals. Tara Charan was being paid in cash, even though the village rate was half that charged in the town: one pice to shave a moustache and beard, two pice for a hair cut, three pice for both a hair cut and a shave. Tara Charan, on his part, had foregone his claim

to some of the things, like rice and clothes that were his customary due for his part in the ceremonies.

The barber had not taken sides and was more or less impartial. When Girish and Aniruddha questioned him, he gave them much confidential information about what the other villagers were thinking and planning. But when the other villagers asked about Girish and Aniruddha, he told them a little too. His sympathies, however, were with Girish and Aniruddha. With Patu he had no contact at all. And about Girish and Aniruddha he actually knew very little. But Tara told Debu everything he heard without being asked; he loved Debu. But he gave some information to Doctor Jaggan also. For the doctor he chose items which would excite him. The doctor would break into loud vituperation, and the delighted Tara Charan would grin. The barber was too cunning to be friendly with Girish and Aniruddha in public. When the three of them talked, they did so in the town.

The barber had also begun to ply his trade in the town, having set up shop under a tree on one side of the market place. Tara Charan had discontinued visiting three of the five villages in which he had regular customers. Of the two where he still worked one was his own village and the other was Mahagram. Mahagram was called Mahugram, the village of the Mahua, by the local people, but the Thakur Mashay insisted the name was Mahagram, the great village. Tara Charan could not deny his services to Mahagram as long as the Thakur Mashay, Nyaratna, was alive. Nyaratna was regarded as a living god. Two days of Tara Charan's week were reserved for these villages. The other five he was in the town, setting out early in the morning like Girish and Aniruddha. The banyan tree beneath which he had set up shop with a couple of bricks was close to Aniruddha's smithy. This was his hair cutting saloon! He dreamed of owning a real barber shop some day! His talks with Aniruddha centered around this dream.

Although Aniruddha had told Girish his suspicions about the cause of Padma's illness, he did not tell Tara. He did not quite trust him.

But as Tara Charan was well-informed about many matters, Aniruddha was debating whether he should tell him or not. He knew all the places where supernatural phenomena took place, holy spots where cures were effected, the haunts of evil spirits that could be profitably appeased, the names of good medicine men and exorcists.

In his distress of mind Aniruddha spoke, not to Tara, but to Doctor Jaggan. He found Padma lying in a faint when he came home from the town one noon. Who knew how long she had

been lying there? He sprinkled water on her face and eyes but she did not stir. Aniruddha was tired and irritated after working at the forge all day, in the heat, and then walking the long distance home. He lost his temper. Tossing the bowl of water aside he took hold of Padma's hair and jerked it cruelly. But Padma did not respond. He let go and stared into her face. Sobs rose trembling in his breast. He ran to the doctor like a mad man. Padma, still unconscious, turned her face away from the strong fumes that rose from the doctor's medicine bottle. Then she sighed deeply and opened her eyes.

"What are you crying about?" the doctor said to Aniruddha. "She's come to."

Tears were streaming down Aniruddha's face. In a choked voice he stammered, "What bad luck I have, Doctor! I've roasted myself over the forge the whole day and walked four miles to come home to find this waiting for me! There's no end to my troubles!"

"What can you do about it?" asked the doctor. "Nobody can be blamed for being sick! Illness isn't caused by human agency!"

"But this is Doctor! This is!" Aniruddha lost his self-control. "I haven't any doubt about it! This is a man's doing! If it weren't, the medicine would have done some good. So much medicine!"

Jagann was a doctor but he had not forgotten time-honoured superstitions entirely. He gave his patients injections, it is true, but he also gave them makardhwaj. He also had faith in the beneficial effects of water in which holy feet have been washed. "It's not impossible!" he said, gazing into Aniruddha's face. "Witchcraft is still practised in this part of the country but medical science makes no provision for it. It says . . ."

"Whatever it may say," Aniruddha interrupted him. "this is the work of that swine Chiru!" He was swelling with rage.

"Chiru?" The doctor was surprised.

"Yes, Chiru!" Aniruddha told the doctor about Padma's dream. At the end of his story he said, "This fellow, this Chandra Goranchi, Chiru's bosom friend, knows black magic. You saw, didn't you, the way he hypnotised the widowed daughter of Yogi Ganray into leaving the house? Chiru has made him do this!"

"Huh!" the doctor shook his head several times as he considered the matter.

Aniruddha's lips were trembling. Padma had sat up while they were talking. She was leaning against the wall, her breath coming in gasps. Aniruddha thought she must have heard what they were saying. He was surprised,

"It's not a bad idea to get a maduli or a tabiz, Aniruddha," the doctor said, adding, "one thought keeps coming back to me. You'll see! The wicked fellow will find his own curse turned against him."

Aniruddha gazed at him in astonishment.

"Do you know what it means to dream of a snake?" the doctor asked.

"What?"

"A child. You have no children. Since Chiru has set the snake on you, his son will die and be born to you. He is giving you one of his sons of his own free will."

The doctor's amazing interpretation of the dream overwhelmed Aniruddha. He stared at him in silence.

Padma's veil had slipped from her head. She was staring strangely, gazing straight in front of her. She remembered Chiru Pal's fair, worn wife and her pleading. "Don't curse my sons," she had said. "Don't curse my sons, Bhai. I bow at your feet."

The doctor and Aniruddha left the room, talking as they went. "There isn't any treatment for this. Her head must not get overheated. Give her something to keep it as cool as possible. Why don't you go to Sivnath Tola at Saogram? It has a good reputation for cures."

The story of Sivnath Tola tells of a dead boy who, disturbed by his mother's incessant weeping, began to visit her in the evenings. His mother set a plate of food for him in a dark room and spread a square of carpet for him to sit on. The spirit of the boy was said to come and take its seat in the room, partake of the food and converse with his mother. People came from long distances to relate their woes to the boy and ask for remedies. The boy told them what to do.

"I'll think about it," answered Aniruddha.

"Don't think. Go. See what the boy says."

Aniruddha smiled sadly. "My back is to the wall, doctor! You know that! How can I go?"

"My savings are gone," he explained in answer to the doctor's questioning look. "we may not have any rice left by the next monsoon. Every stalk of grain in my fields is gone. The villagers have not paid me my annual share of their produce, and I haven't asked for it. And you know what this illness of my wife is costing me! I've heard Sivnath Tola is an expensive place!"

The ghost-god Sivnath cured illness and gave advice but something had to be paid to his mother in advance.

"If it's a matter of six or seven rupees, Aniruddha, I'll try to find it somehow or other but if it's more—" Jaggan said.

"That'll be enough! That'll be enough, Doctor!" Aniruddha

exclaimed excitedly, "Others will help too. Debu. Durga perhaps."

"Durga?" the doctor frowned.

Aniruddha scratched his head in embarrassment and smiled. "Patu's sister."

"Oh!" The doctor's eyes grew round and he smiled too, very slightly. "The hussy has money, hasn't she?"

"She certainly has. She's taken a lot off Chiru and she's well paid by the Konkona gentlemen. She won't talk for less than five rupees."

"I hear she's broken completely with Chiru?"

"She got me to make a big bill hook for her," Aniruddha's eyes grew round. "She say there's no trusting a mad dog. She sleeps with the hook beside her."

"What?"

"It's true, Mashay,"

"But how is it you're so friendly with her? Are you two intimate?"

"No, it's not that, but -" Aniruddha scratched his head. "Durga's a nice girl. She comes and goes, talks. She's friendly."

"Drink? Do you drink with her?"

"A little--now and then--occasionally--" Aniruddha smiled shyly.

Aniruddha's friendship with Durga had in fact developed into an affair of the heart.

Durga sold milk in the town nowadays. On her way back she stopped for a smoke and a chat at Aniruddha's. And Aniruddha passed Durga's house on his way home. Durga would offer him a cigarette. He would smoke while they chatted and joked. The new bill hook had been the excuse in the beginning. It did not take them long to become close friends. One day Aniruddha did not have the money to buy some iron he needed urgently. He was sitting glumly in his smithy when Durga came up and asked him what the matter was.

Aniruddha gave her a cigarette and lit one himself. In the course of their conversation he told her what was troubling him. Durga at once untied the corner of her sari, took out two rupees and handed them to him. "Pay it back to me within four days, Bhai," she said.

Aniruddha had paid her back on time. Durga had smiled and said, "You're a golden debtor!"

Durga liked Aniruddha very much. He was spirited and strong and not afraid of anybody. Yet, by nature he was gentle

and sweet. His physique appealed to her most of all. He was tall. His body was as though sculpted from stone. She trembled in terror when he raised the huge iron hammer and delivered blow after blow so easily, crashing the hammer down on his forge. Yet she liked it. Not a blow went wrong.

Aniruddha returned to the house. Padma was still sitting where they had left her. There was no sign of any cooking having been done. Without saying a word to her he gathered a few pieces of wood and sat down to light the stove himself. He had to cook though there was a lot of work waiting for him in the town. He would have to hurry back to his smithy as soon as he had eaten.

"Go!" Padma cried out suddenly, as if scolding somebody. Aniruddha looked around. There was nobody in the house, not even a cat, a crow or a dog. "What's the matter?" he asked, frowning.

"What's the matter?" Padma repeated his question.

"Are you out of your mind?" Aniruddha was angry. "Whom are you scolding? There's no one here."

Padma stirred. As she became more aware of her surroundings she felt ashamed. Dragging herself to her feet she tottered to the kitchen and said, "I can do it. Move over."

Aniruddha stared at her. Then he got up. It was more than he could bear.

What if Padma fainted in his absence? He hesitated for a moment. Let her faint if she had to! He went out.

Padma lit the stove. She put some potatoes in the rice and tied masoor dhal in a clean cloth which she also put with the rice. She waited quietly for the fire to flame up.

Aniruddha was not at home. There was no one in the house. Padma had been thinking about her dream all day. She also thought of what the doctor had said. She was alone and lonely! How dearly Pal's eldest boy loved his mother!

"Will he be the one to come?"

Her heart throbbed violently.

In the half-light and half-shadow of the back door the boy's mother seemed to stand looking at Padma with beseeching eyes. She drew a deep agonised breath. "No -- no -- no," she repeated over and over again to herself. "I don't want to deprive you of your heart's treasure! I don't want to!"

The wood blazed up in the stove. The pots and pans were in front of her. It was time to start cooking. But Padma did nothing. She sat there in silence. An impatient, dissatisfied voice within her cried out suddenly, in a cruel tone, "Let him

die! Let him die!" The face of Chiru Pal's son floated before her eyes. It was followed by the face of his sweet mother. "No—no—no!" Padma shuddered in restless terror.

Pal's wife had borne him eight children. Only two were left. She was pregnant again. What did it matter to her if she lost one more?

The fire in the stove was burning hotly but Padma thrust the wood further into it for no reason at all. And for no reason she cried aloud, "Shame! Shame! Shame!"

Then she called the cat, "Meni! Meni! Come here! Come, Pussy, come!"

What does a woman live for if she has no child? What is a family without children? The baby scatters everything—leaves, bits of paper, sticks, stones, dust, lumps of earth! She would scold him and pet him and clean up after him. The baby would cry. The baby would smile. Padma would gather him to her breast. She would pretend to eat the mud pies he baked and exclaim over their goodness. He would laugh, complain, prattle, insist on having what he wanted! Sometimes Padma would slap him lightly when she grew weary of his begging. He would cry, climb into her lap and fall asleep. Padma would run her hands caressingly over his head and body and kiss him on the cheeks before putting him to bed . . .

The tears sprang to her eyes and ran down her face as she mused.

She had no child of her own. If only some one would give her a child to look after! A child which had lost its own mother. Didn't the mothers of young babies die? Wouldn't Pal's wife die? Or the Pandit's wife? Why didn't she die herself? If she were to die there would be an end to all her troubles.

The sound of Aniruddha's voice startled her out of her reverie. He was talking loudly. "I've nothing whatever to do with the temple pavilion! I'm not going there again. I'll hold the Paush festival in my own house!"

A wild rage suddenly stirred in Padma's heart. She felt like taking a burning brand from the stove and setting the house on fire. Let it turn to ashes! Let it! Let the fire consume Aniruddha too! The next instant she set a pot on the stove, poured water into it and started washing the rice.

Tomorrow the Lakshmi of Paush was to be worshipped, the festival of the last day of the month of Paush.

Lakshmi! What was Lakshmi to her? Lakshmi for whom? What kind of Lakshmi?

Chapter 16

Two months after the harvest festival, Navanna, another joyous celebration is held in which everyone participates. On the last day of the month of Paush, the Paush Lakshmi is worshipped in a ceremony called the Paush Parvan. Two months is a long time when half of the day, from dawn to dusk, is spent walking behind slow-paced oxen in the fields or pushing carts stacked as high as houses with straw or grain or panting asthmatically beneath the load of grain on one's head! The Itu Lakshmi festival had come and gone in the interval. But though it is kept according to prescribed rules Itu is not an elaborate ceremony, nor is there so much merrymaking. The Paush Parvan is celebrated in every home joyously with a variety of specially prepared cakes. On the last day of the month of Agrahayan, Lakshmi is worshipped on threshing floors with flattened rice, puffed rice dipped in molasses, puffed rice balls, plain puffed rice and fried pulses. At Paush Parvan, Lakshmi is worshipped in the house. A throne is built for her with rice and cowries, with two wooden owls set on either side of it. Other gods are also worshipped. Fifty different dishes are offered with the rice. Rice is pounded into flour to make cakes. Molasses and coconut, molasses and sesamum, condensed milk and dried cream are the other ingredients. People eat their fill of the sweetmeats prepared with them.

In Aniruddha's house no preparations at all had been made for Paush Parvan. Padma was not well, for one thing, and he had also run out of money. His smithy had been more or less closed the whole month of Paush. There's not much work for a blacksmith at the time of the year, but there is some. Scythes need sharpening and cart wheels need to have their iron rims tightened. Work like this cannot be postponed. But Aniruddha had no time to attend to even such small jobs as these. He was working in the fields with his share-croppers to save as much of the grain that remained to him as possible. So much had

been stolen! He brought the grain home on his own head. He had been unable to bring all of it in even though the quantity was small.

And the Government Settlement had been announced. The people had been notified that they must be present in the fields, each on his own land, with proof of ownership. Punishment would be incurred under the Settlement Rules if anybody was absent. They took from early morning to three o'clock in the afternoon to measure even a small plot. The surveyors and tabulators took three or four days to move from one plot to another, dragging the heavy iron chain over the ripe grain as they went. A break of two or three days followed the measuring of every plot. Not only Aniruddha, but everybody in the village also was being harassed and humiliated at every turn. Preparations for the Paush Lakshmi festival were in progress but Lakshmi herself was still in the fields. Not a single householder in the whole village had received daan. This was an additional botheration. The daan is brought in on the last day of reaping. Aniruddha himself would cut the last handful of grain, pour a libation on its root and carry it into the house on his head. He had no hired help. Those with whom he shared the crop would have to be feasted on sweet milk payesh. This was always done at the time of the Paush Parvan. This year it had to be postponed because of the Settlement.

Padma took the pot of rice off the stove and poured the water away. She poked around in it until she found the bag of pulses and pulled it out. She took out the potatoes and a slice of pumpkin. When these were ready she would look for fish. Aniruddha could not eat rice without fish. On the edge of the pond in the back of the house they had dug a hole into which mud fish entered. They could be caught by hand if one was quick and careful enough. Padma looked towards the outer door with great annoyance. Couldn't he do that much for her? Where had the nawab gone? She had not heard him since he had shouted that he would have nothing to do with the pavilion. Mother Kali and Father Siva would certainly ruin their crop of brinjals by flooding the fields if he didn't show some respect for the pavilion! If he had been less perverse, would their affairs have gone so badly?

"Karmakar, are you at home? Karmakar! O Karmakar! Karmakar! Heh!"

Who was calling? The person kept on even though no one answered.

"O Karmakar, your Durga said you had gone home. Why don't you answer? O heh, Karmakar!"

Aniruddha had gone to Durga's house. The woman was good looking! Shame! Shame! Shame! How could Lakshmi dwell in the house of such a man? How could he have children? Padma was distracted. She drew a blazing stick of wood out of the stove. She would set the house on fire. Burn everything up! But Bhupal, the watchman, entered the house at that moment.

"What sort of a fellow are you, Karmakar? I ask you? My voice is hoarse with shouting! Where are you, Karmakar? Where are you?"

Bhupal was embarrassed at not finding Aniruddha in the house. "Tell him that I came," he said, "the gomasta swears at me for being lazy about summoning people! People don't come when they're called!"

"Who's there? What do you have to say to Karmakar?" Aniruddha entered.

"Here you are, Karmakar!" Bhupal was relieved, "Please come with me. The gomasta is about to cut off my head."

"A—e," Aniruddha caught him by the arm. "Why did you enter the house?"

"Let go of me, Karmakar," Bhupal looked at him sullenly.

"Why did you enter my house? If you want to remind me his rent is due, you can do that from outside! Zemindar's minion! You slavish mole! You bat!"

"Aye—o—," Bhupal raised his voice, wrenching his arm free. "Be careful what you say, Karmakar! Be careful! Two years' rent is due. Don't forget that! Why don't you pay it? Of course I'll enter your house!" Bhupal was a Bagdi. He spread his chest and faced Aniruddha. "The Union Board tax. You owe that too!"

Rent! Union Board tax! Aniruddha felt wild. But he did not dare go much further. "If I had been at home," he said, returning to his accustion and ignoring other matters, "you would have been welcome to come in, if you wanted to. Why should you enter when there's no man in the house? Tell me that!"

"Come on. The gomasta has sent for you," Bhupal said.

"Go yourself. Tell him I'm not coming."

"What about the rent?"

"Tell him I won't pay it."

"Very well!" Bhupal went out. Aniruddha was relieved. He was pleased at his straight answer. He began to bluster. "There are courts. There are lawyers. There is the law. Go on! Complain against me! You enter my house! You dare to come inside the house! What insolence! Just look!"

Suddenly he changed his tone and began to whine, "Don't we

have any honour just because we're poor? Aren't we human beings?"

Padma had not said a word. She was putting salt and oil on the boiled vegetables in silence. At last she asked, "Yes, now, what about the fish?"

"Fish? I don't want any fish. I'm not hungry! I don't want anything to eat! I'm sick of food!"

Padma began to serve the rice and vegetables without another word.

"It's you who have driven away my Lakshmi!" Aniruddha turned on her suddenly.

"Me?"

"Yes, you! You lie around the whole day. You're sick. No incense is lighted in this house. No prayer lamps sparkle in the evening. How can Lakshmi live in such a house? Tomorrow is the Paush Lakshmi Parvan. Have you made any preparations at all?" Aniruddha got up and left in a huff.

Padma sat silently. The anger that had been burning within her had changed into a strange indifference. Whether the change had been brought about by Aniruddha's insult or not she did not know but the madness that had seized her shortly before and driven her to think of setting fire to the house was completely gone. She spread her scarf on the ground and lay down where she was.

Padma was crying silently. Tears flowed over her cheeks and wet the ground. The deep pain in her chest abated when she cried. After a while she felt better.

"Who's at home? Where is the blacksmith's wife?"

Who was calling her? Padma wiped her eyes without answering. She did not feel like responding.

"Blacksmith's wife. Oh, Mother, why are you lying with your face to the stove at this time of day?"

Padma's body burned. She recognised the voice. It was Durga. How impudent she was! The way she called! "Why? What do you want?" she asked crossly.

"I have something to say to you," Durga smiled.

"To me? Why? What?"

"Sit up and I'll tell you."

"I'm not feeling well."

"Are you sick? Shall I come up on the porch?" Durga was alarmed.

"No," Padma cried quickly. She sat up.

"You've been crying, haven't you?" Durga looked at her

face. "What's the matter? Have you quarreled with Karma-kar?" She giggled.

"What's that to you? What do you have to say? Tell me. How you worry about my health! Almost like a kinswoman."

"You are, you know, Bhai, my kinswoman. Tell me if I'm not."

"Am I related to you?" Padma, in her indignation, used the contemptuous pronoun, *tui*.

Durga laughed. She was not annoyed. "Yes, heh, yes! If I say I'm your husband's other wife? Your husband loves me, doesn't he?"

Padma was really angry this time. She picked up the kitchen broom and raised it threateningly.

Durga moved away. "I'll have to bathe again if that touches me," she said. "It's late to bathe. Hear what I have to say first. Then hit me if you must."

Padma was astonished.

"Wait a minute, Bhai, let me close the outside door," said Durga, "somebody may come."

Padma had not yet quietened down. "What's the use of shutting the door?" she asked biting. "I don't have droves of visitors."

"But I have, Bhai," Durga answered. "What if they follow me here?"

"Don't I have the broom against any poison that dares enter my house?"

Durga closed the door and came back, standing at a safe distance. "You can do that to strangers. But what about your own man? He is also one of my - what you called him. Now then, enough joking. Take these things into the house." Durga put down a small covered basket she was carrying. Out of the basket she took a pot of milk, a pot of molasses, several coconuts, a seer or so of sesamum, half a seer of oil in a bowl and a selection of spices. She said, "Get things ready for your Lakshmi Puja. I haven't any unparboiled rice. Parboiled rice won't do. Your husband told me that."

Padma was burning with anger. She felt like turning the vessels over and smashing them with a stick. A knocking at the outside door stopped her. Perhaps it was Aniruddha. Good. Let him see. She would smash them in front of him.

She hurried to the door and opened it. It was not Aniruddha. Ranga Didi stood outside. Padma greeted her quietly, "Ranga Didi?"

"Yes, how are you, grandson's wife?" As she spoke her eyes fell on Durga. "Who's that? Who is sitting there?"

"It's me," Durga raised her voice, "Durga. Durga of the Bayens."

"Durga. Don't you have a home of your own? You're here, there, everywhere! All over the place: Konkona, the town! Is there any place you don't go? What are you doing here? What are those things?"

"The blacksmith's wife gave me money to buy these things for her in the town. I've just brought them, Ranga Didi."

"Why didn't you ask me? I sold a rupee worth of rice today, sitting here in the village, and made purchases worth four annas. The rice would have fetched two pice more in the town and my purchases cost one pice less. I don't have a strong, able husband. My bad luck! Why should anyone do anything for me?"

"You can give me errands to do, Ranga Didi. I'll do them gladly." Durga smiled.

"I'll do that. You're aren't such a bad person even though you are wicked. What's it to me what you do? You can do as you like."

Durga laughed aloud. "Right you are, Ranga Didi, you've nothing to be afraid of. You don't have an old man! I'll do your marketing for you."

"Is that anything to laugh about?" the old woman cried.

"All right. I won't laugh. What have you come to say?"

"Nobody's come to say anything to the likes of you! I've come to my grandson's wife. Yes. Why is it you haven't come to make rice flour this year?"

Ranga Didi had a pounder. Padma always went to her house to make flour, but she had not gone that year. The old woman had come to ask if anything was wrong. "Have I said anything to offend you? Tell me, have I? This old woman doesn't remember all the things she says."

"That's not the reason, Ranga Didi," Padma smiled wanly. "I haven't made any flour this year."

"No flour? What do you mean?"

"No."

"Then when will you do it? There's no time left. Before the night is out—"

Padma said nothing.

"Your grandson's wife is sick, Ranga Didi, don't you know that? What can she do if she doesn't feel well?" Durga interposed.

"Then? How will she celebrate the Paush festival? Where is that man of yours? That Aniruddha? Can't he do it?"

"Let Karmakar come," said Durga, "it'll be managed somehow. He'll buy some rice flour from the shop."

"Buy flour? No, no. How can Lakshmi be worshipped with

flour made in a machine? Grandson's wife, listen to me. Go and fetch some flour from my house. I can let you have two seers or more. Oh, all right! I'll bring it myself. Please. You needn't thank me. I'll bring it over right now."

The old woman stopped at the door as she went out. "Durga, have you ever seen a dealer like Icchu Shekh? He's offering me four rupees for the old cow. It took a lot of bargaining to make him raise it to five. If any other dealer comes around please send him to me, will you?"

Durga picked up her basket and rose. "You can give me the pots tomorrow, Bhai. I must be going now."

"Eat with us tomorrow."

"All right." Durga laughed.

Everything was suddenly changed. Padma's rage and pain had vanished as she talked to Ranga Didi. She felt all right again. She did not reject the things Durga had brought. She did not upturn them or smash them with a stick. The way Durga had lied to Ranga Didi pleased her.

She waited for the rice flour Ranga Didi had promised to bring. There was no unparboiled rice in the house. A paste of rice flour and water would have to be made. She would paint white designs around the altar and along the floor with it, and also on the floor of the temple pavilion. From the outer door she would paint a path into the house and set the footprints of the goddess on it. From the house the path would lead to the threshing floor, the granaries, the bins. She remembered she needed an auri bauri rope. Everything in the house and in the storehouse must be tied with a rope made from the straw left over from the first handful of rice cut on the last day of the month of Karttik. The trunks and chests inside the house, everything, must be tied securely in the cords of Lakshmi.

Once there was a cowherd. He took his cattle to graze on a broad pasture beside a forest. The rains of the monsoon, the cold winds of winter and the heat of the summer came and went, passing over his head. Now and then he wept in discomfort and pain. Then he lifted his face and prayed to God, saying, "I can't bear any more. Do away with my suffering, Lord. Save me."

One day Lakshmi and Narayan were walking down a road in Heaven. They heard the cowherd praying. Lakshmi's soft motherly heart was pained. She said, "Thakur, do something for the cowherd. Relieve his suffering."

Narayan smiled, "It is not for me to do something for him, Lakshmi. I don't have the power. You have."

"Give me permission," said Lakshmi.

Lakshmi obtained Narayan's consent to descend to earth. The earth glowed with a golden light and was filled with the heavenly fragrance that emanated from the person of the goddess. The cowherd was amazed at the sight of her. She went up to him and said, "If you do as I tell you, no trouble will come to you ever again. Take these rice seeds. When the rains come, scatter them over the ground. The seeds will sprout and grow. When the grain is the colour of my body and the fragrance is like the fragrance of my flesh, you shall cut it and take it home."

The cowherd bowed to the feet of Lakshmi. When the rains came he scattered the seed over the ground. The plain filled with the green of growing rice plants. The rains stopped and the tips of the stalks began to swell and turn into grain. The cowherd looked at them but they were not yet the colour of the goddess' complexion nor did they have her fragrance. The cowherd waited. One night in early winter the fragrance came to him as he lay in bed. He rose early and hurried into the fields. The plain was filled with a golden light and the air with a divine scent. He was astounded. Birds and insects were flying over the grain and beasts of the field had begun to gather on its borders. The goddess seemed to have seated herself in the fields out of sympathy for the cowherd in his trouble. He cut the grain and carried it home.

The king of the country heard the wonderful news. He came and bought the grain for gold. The king's treasury was emptied of its gold but the cowherd's granaries were all full as before. The king was astonished beyond measure. He brought his own daughter, the princess, and gave her in marriage to the cowherd. The last day of the month of Paush was approaching. The cowherd worshipped the goddess. He heaped the shining grain upon her throne and decorated it with black and red. Before it he placed a pot full of water, with mango leaves and a green coconut upon it. The princess husked the grain and then she cooked the rice. With the rice and cakes of many kinds, sweetened milk, five kinds of flowers, incense, sandalwood, and lamps, the cowherd and the princess worshipped the goddess and received a share of the offerings.

The goddess Lakshmi appeared to them in person and granted them a boon, saying, "Whoever worships me as you have done on this day, will find that I shall bless his house forever. He will never want for anything on earth nor shall sorrow afflict him. After death he shall dwell in Baikuntha."

Padma set about her preparations with a contented heart, recalling the story. Hope filled her breast. She painted designs from the gate to the house, across the courtyard, to the bins, to the cowshed, setting the footprints of the goddess among leaves and flowers. In front of the throne in the centre of the house she painted a large lotus. This was where the goddess would rest. Padma was a skilful artist. She washed the conch shell, set out the incense, polished the lamp, making a new wick for it, prepared collyrium and placed a pot of vermillion powder beside it. When all these were ready she sat down to boil the milk till it condensed to a paste. How much there was to do! Was there no end to her work? If she had had a little girl, she would have helped her now, bringing things to her, taking them away.

But Padma remembered that no designs had been painted in the temple pavilion. Padma stood up and thought for a minute. Aniruddha had declared they would not go to the pavilion. The Paush Parvan would be observed in his house. No, that could not be. Padma would not allow it to be done. Padma was changed. Her smile was incomparably beautiful. It was as though some magician had touched her with a wand. Elephant trunks twined around the cement steps that led from the road up to the pavilion, on either side as though holding them up. The bokul tree at Shashti Tola was encircled by a round cement altar. The smooth polished cement of the new floor was shining. The clay pillars had been renewed. The construction of a well was in progress. Padma had heard all this was being done by Srihari Ghosh. She sighed and sat down to paint. "Paush, Paush, seat yourself in the big house." She drew a house. She drew bins. "Come, Paush, take your seat. Do not leave us." It was Paush for Srihari Ghosh. What kind of Paush had they had?

"Who is it? Don't clutter the place up with your painting. You pour pots of paint to evoke blessings for yourself, child. But it was another who poured out money to cement the floor. Tell me who's going to wash and wipe it clean after the ceremony?"

Padma turned around. Srihari's mother was standing in the road, shouting at her. Padma did not protest. Srihari's mother had the right to say such things certainly. She finished her painting and came away.

As she entered the house she met Debu coming out of it. She drew her veil and moved aside. Behind Debu was Aniruddha, standing in the doorway. Debu smiled and said, "Be sure to come to hear the Paush Lakshmi stories tomorrow. Your Miteni told me to remind you."

Padma nodded her veiled head. She would go. Debu left. Aniruddha said, "The pandit was here. He heard we had not made any preparations for the Paush Parvan. He gave me two rupees. There's nobody like him." He was silent for a minute and then added, "But he will not prosper. Chiru is the one who will prosper."

Padma sighed and said nothing.

"Tell me, do you need anything else?" Aniruddha asked.

"No."

"Then finish up. Get everything ready. But first give me a little tobacco, will you?"

Padma gave Aniruddha his tobacco and sat down to make molasses and coconut cakes. Her breast was filled with bitter reproach once more. Debu was divine, more like a god than a man. There was nothing to say about him. Even Durga was capable of compassion. She could love. And miserly Ranga Didi did nice things. Srihari Ghosh had astonished her by the changes he had brought about. But what had their lives been?

Padma felt sorry for herself, but she refrained from envy on this day. On the contrary, respect for others filled her heart. She prayed over and over, "Mother Lakshmi. Comfort me. Do away with my misery. Fill my home with children and riches. I'll worship you with all the sixteen sacred objects. I'll cut off my finger to make a wick for your lamp, cut my hair to make a fan for you, cut my breast and paint your feet with my blood. I'll worship you with the five sacred sounds, spread a silken awning above your head, seat you upon a silver throne beneath a golden umbrella. I will distribute your blessed offerings to kinsfolk, friends, the poor and the destitute, to animals and to birds. You shall dine on fifty courses and fine rice."

"Padma! O Padma!" Aniruddha called from outside the house. Padma shuddered. What was the matter now?

Aniruddha entered and said, "Take the pot off the stove for a minute and come with me."

"Why?"

"They're taking the pandit away. Let's go to his house."

"Taking him away? Who?"

"The Settlement Hakim issued a warrant. The police came to execute it."

Settlement! Settlement! Ugh! Where had these people come from? They had taken the village by the hair and shaken it until every nerve of its body was numb with pain. Always a new notice! Always a new order! The peons with their official badges were coming and going all the time. Cycles passed con-

tinually up and down the roads. But what a disaster! They'd arrested a man like Debu Pandit!

Chapter 17

THERE was more than one charge against Debnath Ghosh. He was arraigned for obstructing the work of the Survey and for assaulting officers of the Department. Acting on instructions received from the local Settlement Officer, the Assistant Sub-Inspector of Police had come, bringing a constable with him. The village watchman, Bhupal, was with them. Debu was to be handcuffed and led away to the local lock-up. The following morning he would be brought before the Settlement Officer. The Settlement Officer could either release him on bail or send him to the District Jail as an undertrial prisoner. He could also appoint a day for the trial and judge the case himself. The Assistant Sub-Inspector of Police was sitting in the temple pavillion and Debu had been asked to come there.

Debu sat silently, his head bowed. His head felt empty inside. He did not have the strength to figure out how it had all happened. The only thing he felt was that he had done the right thing, whatever the consequences might be.

Nearly everybody in the village was there. Srihari and Dasji, the gomasta, were sitting beside the Assistant Sub-Inspector. Now and then the three of them conversed in low voices. Harish and Bhabesh had come, Haren Ghosal, Mukunda Ghosh, Kirtibas Mandal, Natbar Pal, Brindaban the grocer from the other village and Ramnarayan Ghosh. Even old Dwarka Chaudhury had come although the winter evening was chilly. Doctor Jaggan was sitting close to Debu. The vociferous Jaggan was silent, depressed. He was dismayed by this sudden, unthinkable development. The village untouchables were standing on one side. Satish, Patu, all of them had come. Durga was sitting apart, beside the Shasti Tola, silently, like a terracotta doll.

Only old Ranga Didi was speaking. She was scolding loudly. Even the very old people had come and were standing on one side. It was to them Ranga Didi addressed herself. "This is like cutting off one's head with one's own hands!" she cried.

"Daroga! Is he something very special just because he's a daroga? Has he seen a snake with five legs? Now, see here, you daroga, what has our grandson done? Has he stolen anything? Has he cheated anybody? Has he committed a robbery? Is that why you have come to bind him and take him away on a night like this? The festival will start well before the day breaks."

"Ranga Didi," said Harish, "please stop."

"Why? Why should I stop? Let me see how great this daroga fellow is!"

"Ranga Didi," Srihari rebuked her less kindly, "shut up. We'll do what has to be done. Keep quiet a little while. You women—"

"Women? I'm seventy years old, I am. Do you dare to call me a woman in that tone of voice? I'll say exactly what I think a hundred times, a thousand times. What will you do to me? Will you tie me up? Do it, then. Tie me up. Aha. A man like the pandit. A boy like Debu!" the old woman broke down and wept.

Debu rose and went to her, "Don't cry, Ranga Didi, don't cry. Tie up you. Please keep quiet."

The old woman rested her hand affectionately on his head. "My blessings, boy, my blessings. The Saheb will let you go the minute he sets eyes on you. He'll offer you a chair and say, 'You're an educated man. How can I put you in jail?'"

Debu smiled.

Ways of hushing up the matter and setting Debu free were being discussed. Srihari took the initiative and Dasji seconded him. The Assistant Sub-Inspector was a friend of Srihari's. Srihari addressed him. Debu was, in reality, though not openly, Srihari's enemy. Srihari knew that Debu hated him. But as the most prominent man in the village Srihari had to take Debu's part that day. What would people think if one of his fellow villagers and a kinsman as well, was bound and led away while he was present? He was trying to think of a way to please the Assistant Sub-Inspector.

"Go to the Peshkar," the daroga advised, "he may be able to do something. Let Debu Babu apologise to the surveyor and record keeper. All he has to do is please the people he has offended. Then everything will be all right. This happens all the time."

Srihari said, "My uncle is very hotheaded. I asked him the very first day, as soon as I heard about it, to see the record keeper and patch up the quarrel. What good can it do to defy a government official?"

"Aae!" exclaimed Bhabesh, "words don't raise blisters, do they?"

"If I had heard about it at the time it happened I would have stopped it then and there," said Srihari, "I was not told until much later."

What had happened was, in fact, an affair of words.

Debu was sitting on the porch at about 12 o'clock. A record keeper passed, riding a cycle. He appeared to have come a long way and was covered with dust and sweat even on that winter day. He got off his cycle when he saw Debu. "E-i! Oh, re! E-i! Listen!"

The man's mode of address annoyed Debu. He became angry. The bitter memory embedded in his heart stirred to life. But he said nothing. From the man's hat, white shirt, khaki pants and cycle he guessed he was a government official.

"Heh, you idiot. Do you hear me?"

Debu frowned and looked at the man. He felt like getting up and going into the house without answering or paying any attention to the fellow. But as he stood up he caught his eye.

"Bring me a glass of water, will you? Go on and get it. In a clean glass, mind you. Nice cold water. Understand?" the man said as their eyes met.

Debu found himself in a dilemma. He could not refuse a request for water, however rudely it was made. He fetched a camp stool from the house and set it on the porch without a word. Then he brought a handfan and placed it on the stool. With a silent gesture he invited the man to take his seat and went into the house. In a few minutes he came back again bringing a glass of clear water on a shining tray, a large round kadama, a towel and a jug of water.

The fellow washed his hands and face. When Debu held the towel out to him he pushed it aside with his left hand and wiped his face and hands on his pocket handkerchief. Then he broke a piece off the kadama and put it into his mouth, perhaps to taste it. The kadama was fresh. It ought to be good. Perhaps he did find it nice, for he ate the whole of it, drank some water and sighed with satisfaction. "Ah!"

Debu had gone into the house again. He had forgotten to offer spices or betel nut. He asked Bilu to give him quickly some shredded areca nuts, cloves and several paans.

The paan was ready. Bilu put the spices on a piece of clean banana leaf and handed them to her husband.

"O, re! You youngster, you!" the man called from outside.

Debu lost patience. Leaving the spices where they were he went out and asked, "What is it, re? What do you want?"

The record keeper was not prepared to be spoken to in the way he himself had spoken. For a few minutes he said nothing, his surprise and anger were too great. Then he exclaimed, "What?"

Do you dare to be disrespectful to me? Do you know—"

"Who was disrespectful first? It was you who started it," Debu answered without any hesitation.

"What's your name? I'll show you!"

Debu looked him squarely in the face and said. "My name is Debnath Ghosh."

The record keeper left without a word.

Srihari's efforts to secure the postponement of the Survey had not been successful. Only seven days had been granted in which to cut the grain and bring it in. But it was impossible to finish reaping the grain in so short a time. Only two or three people had managed to get their harvest in on time.

Srihari, Brindaban Dutta, the grocer, and the miser, Helaram Chatterjee, engaged a large number of extra hired hands and got the work done. They had money. The work of the Survey began and the iron chain was dragged over the standing crop belonging to other villagers. Of course the government had issued instructions to spare the grain as much as possible by working from the ridges between the fields.

Debu had gone into the fields on the first day. There he saw the same record keeper standing beside the Survey table. The record keeper noticed Debu too. Both of them were annoyed. The record keeper was dyspeptic. He had a most disagreeable temper and was in the habit of treating everyone rudely. Debu began to avoid him carefully. But it was not long before the record keeper summoned him to appear in the camp in connection with some very minor matters.

Debu was already irritated. He became angry and decided not to obey the summons. He would not go to the camp to stand obsequiously before the record keeper with folded hands, whatever the consequences.

The record keeper took the opportunity to report the matter to the Settlement Deputy. The Deputy was somewhat surprised when he saw the notice. Were notices issued over such slight affairs? He knew the record keeper and his temper. According to the rules, however, he had to issue the new notice. Debu disobeyed a second time. The next step was, according to the rules, a warrant. It was just at this junction that an incident of a serious nature took place.

While a plot of his land was being measured there was an exchange of words between Debu and the record keeper. Debu had not brought the receipt for the land. As he answered the record keeper's questions Debu noticed that a heavy chain was being dragged over some grain standing right in the centre of his field. He thought the record keeper had ordered it to be done deliberately, though that was not actually the case. Since Debu's

plot was uneven in shape, it had to be measured across the middle. The record keeper was not to be blamed. Debu misunderstood the situation. He seized the chain and threw it to one side. The record keeper immediately left the field with his table, his chair and his chain and went straight to the Deputy's camp to report.

The Deputy was a real gentleman. He knew how simple and harmless the people of Bengal villages are. He was one of them. The incident astonished him. But the record keeper's friend, the peshkar, was a wily person. He gave the Deputy to understand that Debu was an associate of J. L. Banerjee. The Deputy could not ignore the matter. A warrant of arrest was the consequence.

Srihari was telling the truth when he said he had entreated Debu to go to the record keeper. He had succeeded in softening him. All that was necessary was for Debu to go himself.

"No," answered Debu.

"Pandit," advised the doctor, "submit a petition. Explain the whole affair to the C.O. Send a petition to the D.L.R. also."

"No," said Debu. "Let it be."

"What will happen?" asked Bilu, alarmed and worried.

"What's fated," Debu answered with a smile.

That was what happened.

"I've succeeded in persuading the Assistant Sub-Inspector. He's willing," Srihari came to Debu and said. "We'll go to the record keeper first, take a letter from him and go to the Circle Deputy. The case will be dropped and we can come home."

"No," answered Debu.

"Why not?"

"No, Chiru, I won't go."

"You know what will happen if you don't? Remember that."

"What's fated," Debu smiled.

Srihari sighed deeply. He was sincerely sorry and could not conceal his irritation. "You're making a mistake, Uncle."

"Then what more can we do?" asked Dasji.

"What else can be done?" the others murmured.

Three persons held back. They did not agree with the others. They were Doctor Jaggan, Aniruddha and Haren Ghosal. Haren Ghosal was in the habit of speaking before everybody else but he got up and left the pavilion in silence, quickly, without a word.

"Don't worry, Debu Babu," said the doctor, "if your case is not tried tomorrow and you're sent to the District Jail I'll engage a lawyer to defend you. And if you're tried tomorrow I'll appeal to a higher court. You'll be given bail at once."

"There's a hundred rupees or so in my Postal Savings Account.

"I've signed a withdrawal slip and left it with Bilu," Debu said. "Take what you need. I know it won't do any good to fight the case but I want to tell the whole story in court when I'm cross-examined."

"Debu Bhai," Aniruddha was profoundly distressed, "it's better to compound the case."

"Ani Bhai, be a little careful," Debu said, "Doctor, keep an eye on him."

"It's growing late," said the Assistant Sub-Inspector, "what have you people decided?"

Debu stood up. "Let's go," he said. "I am ready."

"Bhupal. Ramkishan."

"Just a minute. Just a minute." Durga came forward and said to Debu, "Go to Bilu Didi once more. Pandit."

"You may go," said the policeman, "but don't take long."

Durga walked in front of Debu. The talkative woman had not a word to say.

"Durga," Debu spoke gently. "look after Bilu and the baby, will you? Ask after them."

The silent woman in front of him nodded in reply.

Bilu was crying. Debu wiped her eyes. Then he spoke of what had to be done. She should withdraw the money from the Post Office Savings Account and keep it with her. The doctor should be given what he required to conduct the case. He asked her to be careful in all matters, weigh and measure the grain and betel and keep the accounts herself. Bilu knew how to keep accounts.

"Don't worry or brood," he told her. "I am leaving everything to you—everything—the baby, the house, the fields—everything. You are the goddess of my home, my Lakshmi. You must keep steady. It won't do for you to get nervous."

Bilu could not say a word.

Debu smiled, drew her to him, pressed her in his arms and left.

Padma and Durga were waiting outside. Debu addressed Padma. "I depend on you to help Bilu. On you and Durga. Take care of her, both of you."

Debu returned to the temple pavilion and said, "Let's go."

"Wait!" Haren Ghosal entered the pavilion dramatically. A splendid garland of marigolds was in his hand. He placed it around Debu's neck and shouted excitedly. "Jai! Debu Ghosh, Jai!"

The whole complexion of the affair changed instantly.

The Assistant Sub-Inspector rose anxiously. He wanted to get away. A thrill ran through Debu, passing from his head to his feet. The last trace of weakness that lingered in his heart disappeared as the garland settled around his neck and the cries

rose around him. A current of rising enthusiasm flooded into him like a tide rising in an ebbing river. He felt taller and broader. Debu strode forward with long, firm steps.

Bilu could not lift a hand to prepare for the Paush Parvan. How could she, with so much pain in her heart, prepare a feast of fifty dishes for anybody? For whom was she to worship Lakshmi? The goddess takes up her abode in men's homes. When it was no longer possible to make Debu the centre of all the festivities, why—? The tears broke from her eyes repeatedly.

But Ranga Didi came to her and said, "Don't worry, Bhai. The Pandit is sure to come home today. Look at me. I have no kinfolk at all, anywhere in the world, yet I worship the goddess. You have a golden moon in your lap and Debu will soon be home. How can you think of not performing the ceremony? Give the things to me. I'll set up everything before I go. Listen to the conch shell in every house. The goddess is being seated upon her throne."

Padma came two or three times. Durga stayed with Bilu. Srihari's wife and mother also came.

His mother said the prescribed verses and prayers. His wife gave Bilu a cluster of bananas, the core of a banana stem and a banana flower. These were the first fruits of the new pond Srihari had recently dug. And she brought some peas and a cabbage. Srihari had bought these vegetables in the town for the festival. "Don't worry," his wife said to Bilu, "your nephew went out early this morning. He'll see the Magistrate. He'll bring his uncle home with him."

Women from every house in the village brought Bilu gifts. The doctor's wife came five times. All the untouchables came. The dealer in palm molasses brought her some of his wares. Everyone, beginning with Satish, brought her milk. When she protested she had enough, nothing more was needed, they refused to listen, asking sadly, "Have we offended you?"

"Bilu Didi, boil the milk till it condenses," advised Durga.

"What good will that do! It'll only go bad."

"Why? The pandit will be home soon. You'll see!"

Several young girls came. "Give us your pots, Didi. We'll fetch water for you," they said.

The girls were like her husband's younger sisters to Bilu. "I've already brought water," she said, "sit down and eat a few cakes."

"No. We've come to help you."

Bilu was moved by their unaffected liking for her. People were being so good to her! Like her own kin!

The girls did not leave until drums announced the tilkut offering at the shrines of the temple pavilion. Sweetmeats of sesamum, sugar and meal are made on this day and offered to Father Siva and Mother Kali first and then to Lakshmi. This is called the tilkut. The pavilion was crowded with the children of untouchables. They hoped to be given a little of the offerings. Later they would go from house to house, asking for sweet cakes.

Many of the men followed Debu to the Settlement Camp. It was 8 o'clock by the time they reached it. All of them looked grave and worried. Although the case had not yet been tried it was obvious what the verdict would be. What could they do? Srihari was the most worried of all. A surveyor had called him aside and told him plainly that whoever gave evidence on Debu's behalf would be attended to later.

The elders of the village decided it would be best not to bear witness for either party, to remain strictly neutral.

Doctor Jaggan, Aniruddha, Haren Ghosal, Dwarka Chaudhury and Tara, the barber, did not return to the village with the others. It was evening before they appeared, dragging their steps, with gloomy faces. Durga was waiting for them beside the road.

"What happened, Doctor Babu? Chaudhury Mashay?"

"They kept him waiting the whole day," Jaggan replied, "and then set a date for the trial in the evening, sending him up to the District Jail. A rascally lot!"

"Sent him up?"

"Yes. I'll go tomorrow and bail the pandit out."

It was not the truth. Debu had been sentenced to a year and three months' imprisonment, a total of fifteen months. Doctor Jaggan intended to appeal, but Debu had asked him not to. The plight of the witnesses made him realise it would be of no use.

Jaggan swore at the villagers. Even Dwarka Chaudhury lost his self-control. "God will be the judge!" he had cried with trembling lips.

"The story you told me the other day," Debu had reminded him, laughing, "have you forgotten it, Chaudhury Mashay? Men make mistakes at every step. One more thing, Chaudhury Mashay, the witnesses have not given any evidence against me, have they? What if they didn't give any for me!"

"If they had," shouted Aniruddha, "lightning would have struck them dead."

They did not mention Debu's jail sentence out of concern for his wife. They decided to keep it quiet.

Durga told Bilu the news. "My mother will spend the night here, Bilu Didi," she said.

"Why don't you stay, Durga?" Bilu asked. "We can pass

the time talking. I'll lie inside the house and you can sleep on the porch."

"No, Bilu Didi," Durga replied.

"Why not, Durga?"

"Bhai, I can't sleep anywhere but in my own bed."

Bilu understood. She did not press her request, nor did she take offence. She smiled sadly. Even death does not change people's natures, it is said.

The day passed slowly but the evening began to drag. Bilu sat in silence. Debu was in jail. The sound of conch shells ringing through the village brought her out of her reverie. The goddess Lakshmi was in the house. Incense and a lamp must be lighted and set before her. The cold offering had not been prepared. When Durga left she had called the cowherd and told him to stay with Bilu. The cowherd had eaten so many cakes his stomach was distended. He wrapped himself up and went to sleep in a corner, moaning softly. He set up at the sound of the conch. "The evening worship has started!" he exclaimed, "Light the lamp, light the incense, blow the conch!"

Bilu sighed and rose. The boy began talking softly to himself of Debu. He talked only of Debu!

"Isn't he thinking about us? I am sure he is."

Bilu wiped her eyes.

"Do they chain people in jail?" the boy asked. "How will the master be able to lie down?"

"Stop it! Don't talk any more," Bilu sobbed.

The cowherd, embarrassed, fell silent.

Bilu prepared the lamp, set out the incense and the cold offering. Then she called him. "Come with me, boy. I must go to the granary and cowshed." She remembered the baby as she spoke. Who would stay with him? He was asleep. On the other days Debu was always at home at this time. Bilu went the rounds alone with the lamp, showing the light and pouring libations of water beneath the bins and in the cowshed. Today she felt afraid. Debu was not there. Her own helplessness and her pitiful grief engulfed her more and more, minute by minute.

"Let's go," said the cowherd, getting up.

"Who will stay with the baby?"

"I'll stay," the cowherd lay down again at once. "What are you afraid of? The field labourers are all at the threshing floor, but one of them will stay here every night while the master's away. Besides, I'm here—but you must tell me stories."

Lamp in hand Bilu made her evening round as usual. When she returned the field labourers were with her.

She set the lamp before the goddess, lit the incense, and made the cold offering. Then she bowed to the ground and prayed,

"Mother, set him honourably free. Bless him. May good come to him. Do not abandon us, Mother. Remain in this house."

"Are there any milk cakes left?" asked the cowherd.

"There are." Bilu smiled softly.

"Then give me seven or eight. I won't eat anything else to-night."

"And you, my sons?" asked Bilu, turning to the labourers.

"Give us some too."

They had eaten like the legendary Bhim at noontime. Debu had delighted in feeding them. He served them himself while Bilu handed him the food.

Everything in the house and the granary had to be tied with the straw rope made from the first bundle of straw cut. "Let the old remain! Let the new come! May both new and old increase! May we, by the grace of Lakshmi, dress in new clothes and dine on old rice. May our lives pass in security and peace of mind. Abide with us, Mother! Abide with us!"

The next morning the cowherd woke with a start. "Who is it?" he cried, hearing a noise outside.

The light of the lantern fell full on Durga. She was neatly dressed in a freshly ironed sari of light brown, her hair was beautifully groomed and there was an auspicious red dot in the middle of her forehead. However, she looked distracted. She was out of breath, her eyes were wild.

"It's a lie, Bilu Didi, it's all a lie!" she cried. "The pandit has been sentenced to fifteen months in jail." Bilu stood still as a stone. She could not stir or make a sound.

Durga had gone to the Settlement Camp that night. The surveyors, record keepers, peons and one or two gentlemen from Konkona took a secret interest in women like Durga, the peshkar being the foremost of the lot. He had invited Durga several times before but Durga had not gone. That night she had gone of her own accord. She said to him, "You must speak to the Magistrate and persuade him to release the pandit."

"All right," the peshkar had promised, "tomorrow morning."

Durga had learned the truth from a peon as she was about to leave the camp. The peon envied the peshkar.

Durga had not delayed an instant. She had come straight to Bilu. All the way she made plans in her mind. She would send a diseased woman she knew to the peshkar.

The women's voices rose in chorus from the temple pavilion.

"Paush! Paush! Golden Paush!

Come Paush, do not go! Do not leave us!

Stay with us in life after life, forever.

Do not leave us, Paush, do not leave us.

Our husbands and sons will eat their full!

Paush! Paush! Golden Paush!
 Seat yourself in the large room.
 Take your seat in the largest room, upon the floor,
 Become fifty-two sons!
 Golden Paush!"

Padma put her hand on Bilu's shoulders and said, "Come, Bhai."

"Let's go," said Bilu, as though in a dream.

What could she do? Was there any way out? When Debu left he had said, "You are the Lakshmi of my home. I leave everything to you—the baby—the house—the grain—the fields—the cows—everything. You must keep steady. It won't do for you to falter." She would keep steady. Golden Paush was departing from her home. She must detain it with offerings and prayers. "Do not leave us! Do not leave us!" Debu would come home again in fifteen months. Then she would prepare a feast for him as for a deity, fifty dishes and fine rice!

Chapter 18

A YEAR passed. Another Paush came and went, followed by the month of Magh and Falgun. On the fifth day of the month of Chaitra, Debu Ghosh got out of the train at the junction station. He crossed the narrow stream to which the Mayurakshi river was reduced at this time of year and climbed the bank of the Sivkalipur side. There he paused. He was returning after a year and three months in prison. Good behaviour had earned him his freedom a few days before his sentence expired. It was only as he set foot on the outskirts of his village, that he fully realised that he was free.

Sivkalipur lay in front of him. Beyond it, to the west, was Kusumpur, a Muslim village; the white minarets of the mosque rose above the green of the trees. Konkona, with its red and white houses, was visible on the other side of it. The junction lay behind Debu, on the south side of the river. To the east of Sivkalipur was Mahagram, the home of Nyaratna Mahasaya. Dekhuria was beyond it, near the river's bend, which was filled

with dense vegetation. Beneath it lay the ruins of Mahishdhar, the Ghosh village which floods had washed away.

Debu climbed to the top of the embankment. It was hot and the sun was strong already on this Chaitra morning although it was only ten o'clock. The expanse of open country spreading round him was deserted. The winter crops of wheat, pulses, barley, and mustard, had been harvested and taken in. A few potatoes and a little sesamum were still in the fields, and a few vegetables. Sesamum was the chief crop at this time of year, and the plants having reached their full growth, were thick and green, on the point of flowering. Debu remembered the story of Chaitra Lakshmi. The goddess was so pleased with the sesamum flowers that she plucked two and put them in her ears. Every year since then she was forced to visit the farmers' homes in order to pay her debt for the exquisitely flared purple blossoms. Debu remembered a traditional simile, "nostrils like sesamum flowers."

During the months he had been in prison, Debu had enjoyed the company of several political prisoners for a time. Because of them his days had passed pleasantly enough. He was thinner, having lost nearly fourteen pounds, but he was not broken. And now he did not, as an ordinary person would have, hurry home. He had reached his own village but he was not impatient. He stopped and took a good look around him. He could see Sivkalipur clearly. Mango trees, bread-fruit trees, plum trees and tamarind trees stood still against the blue of the sky like a painted picture. Only the tips of the bamboos were stirring. Behind the gently swaying sprays was his home. He glimpsed the house through them. There was the great bokul tree of Dharma-raj Tola, with the houses of the Bayens, Bauris and other Harijans clustered around it. The largest of the huts was Durga's. Durga! Ah, how admirable she was! He had disliked her intensely and resented her familiarity. He had often spoken roughly to her. But Durga had been a great help when they were in trouble. He had first realised the helpfulness of her nature on the day he was arrested. Since then Bilu had told him many things about Durga in her letters. Durga spent most of the day with Bilu, cared for her like a servant, looked after the baby, did anything she could. Where had this Durga been? He had seen only the hard, pleasure-loving prostitute.

The roof of a large house was visible. That was Uncle Harish's. Next to it was the house of Bhabesh Dada. He could not see it. Over there on that side the sun sparkled on a roof of corrugated iron. That was Srihari's. Beyond it lay the ruins of the small hut of the destitute Tarini. In the centre of the village, beside the main road, stood the temple pavilion. Haren Ghosal's cottage,

which he called 'Ghosal House,' was beyond it. On the door of the outside room was written Parlour. Another room was labelled Study. Ghosal was a strange character, Debu would never be able to forget the garland Ghosal had placed around his neck! He knew all about Ghosal. Ghosal had passed the Matriculation examination but he was, nevertheless, an ignorant and stupid fellow, timid and cowardly, who associated intimately with Patu Bayen's wife although he was a Brahmin. But on the day of Debu's arrest Ghosal had acted like a true Brahmin! A Brahmin of the Satya Yug. Debu had accepted the garland as he would have accepted the blessing of his father. It had filled him with strength when he needed it most, at the moment of his departure. And because of it he had found friends in jail among the political prisoners.

Who was not a friend to him? Bilu wrote about the people of the village in a way that made them seem paragons of kindness. Debu recalled a village saying, "One's own mother and one's own village!" Yes! Mother! This village had mothered him from childhood. He bowed down, lifted a handful of dust and put it on his head.

Debu noticed the flame-of-the-forest at the height of its glory. How bright the red flowers were! The long delicious seed pods of the morunga plant hung above the thatch of a cottage roof. Vermillion blossoms covered the leafless branches of a silk cotton tree on the northern fringe of the village. A vulture crouched on the crest of a tall palm. Debu could see a row of green pigeons sitting on a bamboo spray behind the doctor's house. The green and gold of the birds' plumage was as beautiful as their call was sweet. The sound was like the musical notes produced by tapping a vessel of water. The sharp fragrance of late mangoes came to him. The fruit had already begun to appear on the branches of the trees. The scent of mango blossoms came from the Chaudhury's garden. It was only in their garden that the trees flowered so late.

"Pandit Mashay!"

Debu turned around at the sound of a boy's voice crying out in delighted surprise. Sudhir, Dwarka Chaudhury's grandson, was coming down a ridge between the fields. He was the son of Chaudhury's eldest boy and had been one of Debu's pupils in the Primary School.

"Sudhir? How are you?" Debu asked with an affectionate smile.

Sudhir ran up to him and bowed at his feet. "Have you just come?" he asked, "were you all right while you were away?"

"Yes. Are you on your way to school at Konkona?"

"Yes. Everyone's fine at your house, Pandit Mashay. Khoka

can say a lot of words now. We play with him in the afternoons."

The joy that surged up in Debu's breast was so deep and strong he was overcome. Did his pupils love him so much?

"There's a new schoolhouse, sir."

"Is there?"

"It's nice. There are three large rooms and new tables and chairs. Polished ones!" He paused and asked with a little hesitation, "Won't you be teaching in the school again, sir?"

"I'm afraid not," Debu sighed, "I won't be teaching any more. Who is the new teacher?"

"The son of the Konkona zemindars' steward. He's a Matriculate and is a trained teacher. But why won't you teach any more?"

"Are you on your way to school, son?" called a young man. "Show me your notebook."

Sudhir took a pencil and notebook out of his bag. Who was this young man? He was almost a boy, not more than eighteen or nineteen. He was wearing spectacles. His clothes were clean. It was obvious he did not belong to this part of the country. He was bright and alert. Sudhir seemed to know him. Debu hesitated to ask who he was in his presence. "Your grandfather well?" he asked Sudhir.

"Yes. He often talks about you."

Debu smiled. He esteemed old Chaudhury. Chaudhury was a fine old gentleman. But why should they talk so much about Debu? Debu felt flattered. "And everyone else at home?"

"Fine. But my little sister died."

"Died?"

"Yes. She wasn't very big. A month old."

The young man handed the notebook and pencil back to Sudhir and said, smiling, "Now read this sum for me."

Sudhir stared at the figure he had written in distress.

"It's a big number," he said, "lakhs or thousands or crores."

"Can't you read it?" The young man looked at Sudhir and laughed. "Twenty-two thousand eight hundred ninety-six crores, sixty-four lakhs and eight-nine thousand."

"What?"

"Rupees."

"Rupees?"

"Yes. That's the value of the articles produced in one year from the mines and factories of the United States of America."

Sudhir was dumbfounded. He gazed into the young man's face stupidly. Debu was also surprised. Who was this strange person?

"All right. Get along with you." The young man slapped Sudhir affectionately on the back. "You'll be late for school."

Then he turned to Debu and asked, "Are you going to Chaudhury Mashay's house?"

So he knew Chaudhury. Debu was more surprised than ever.

"No," he answered, "I'm going to Sivpur."

"To whose house, if I may ask?"

"Do you know everybody? Do you know Debnath Ghosh?"

"I know his house," the young man answered, speaking with profound respect. "I know his little boy. But I have not met him yet! He went to jail before I came. He'll be back soon."

"This is our Pandit Mashay," said Sudhir.

"You!" the young man's eyes brightened with pleasure. He threw his arms round Debu. "Uh! You're Debu Babu! Come. Come. Come home with us."

"And you? I'm afraid I don't—" Debu said.

"He's a detenu, sir. He's being kept under surveillance in our village." Sudhir's eyes widened in admiration.

"I live at Aniruddha Karmakar's house. The outer room had been rented for me. Sudhir, run on ahead, will you? Tell everybody the news! One, two, three. Off you go! you're a mail train. The Toofan Mail."

Sudhir sped off like an arrow.

"You understand, don't you, that I'm a political prisoner? I'm under detention. The police have placed me in this village for the present." The young man smiled.

A small crowd of people met Debu as he entered the village: Jaggan, Aniruddha, Haren, Tarini, Ganesh and a few others. Some were waiting for him at the temple pavilion. Srihari was there. So was Bhabesh, Harish and other elders. "Come in, son," they greeted him warmly, "come in and sit down." Debu bowed at the shrines and afterwards touched the feet of the elders. Srihari bowed to him. Debu was an uncle to Srihari even though he was much younger. Srihari, a proud man of wealth and position, did not bow often to anyone, but he touched Debu's feet that day.

Debu's house was not far from the pavilion. He could see the siuli tree in front of it. There was a crowd of people in the doorway.

The women of the village were waiting to welcome him. On either side of the door stood a young girl carrying a full pot of water. Debu was deeply moved. How kind the people of his village were to him! The deep resonant boom of a conch made

him turn his head. Debu recognised Padma in the tall veiled woman who held it in her hands.

As he entered the house, Durga placed his son at his feet. Then she bowed to the ground.

Bilu was standing behind the door with her veil drawn down to her chest. Debu lifted the child in his arms and looked at Bilu. Ranga Didi tugged at his arm. "What are you," she said, "pandit or ignoramus, or what! Haven't you any feelings? Come with me!"

"Stand back, Ranga Didi, let me touch your feet."

"That's not at all necessary." The old woman drew him into the room. She pushed Bilu after him and said, "Here he is! Take him!" Then she turned to the other women and said, "Go home now. Let's go, all of us. If you don't go, I'll scold you."

The women smiled and went away. Debu took Bilu gently by the hand and called her name, "Bilu."

Bilu's eyes were swollen. Her face was streaked with tears. "Let me touch your feet," she said, wiping her eyes.

"Master Mashay!" cried the cowherd running up. He was grinning from ear to ear and quite out of breath. "I heard the news in the fields," he said, "and came at once."

"Pandit Mashay! Where's he?" This time it was Satish. With him were the other Harijans.

"Where's our Pandit Mashay?" called old Dwarka Chaudhury. The sound of his voice agitated Debu.

What a day it was! It was unequalled!

So much affection, so much warmth, so much generosity! Where had it lain beneath the decay of this mouldering village, so cankered with malice and envy!

"I must go out," Debu said to Bilu. "Chaudhury Mashay has come. Only in times of adversity can one come to know people! I used to think this was the meanest and most spiteful of villages!"

"Of course the people love you," Bilu smiled as she answered. "Do you know that after you went to jail the Settlement people became very polite? They didn't dare to say a rough word to anybody. You are the talk of the five villages. Everybody blesses you with lifted arms!"

Many things had happened in the course of the year. One by one the villagers came and gave him the news. Jaggan gave his version of events. Haren agreed with him but made some corrections.

A Praja Samity had been formed. A Congress Committee

too. Both at the same time. Jaggan was the President, Haren the Secretary.

"You can choose whichever you like. It's understood you are to be the President of one of them as soon as you return. I think you ought to be President of the Congress Committee but the detenu, Jatin Babu, says no. He thinks you should be the President of the Praja Samity."

"Chiru Pal is a big man now. He has bought a large hubble-bubble, sits on a rug in the pavilion and surrounds himself with piles of pillows. He was only the money-lender, but now he has become the gomasta as well. The village is being ruined!"

The affairs of the zemindar were in a bad way. Srihari had money. The zemindar had made him the gomasta of the village on one condition that the revenue would be paid in full and on time whether or not Srihari was able to collect it. Srihari was taking the opportunity to realise his own debts as well as the zemindar's revenue, killing two birds with one stone. Lands were being put up for auction. A fat profit remained for him when all accounts had been settled.

Ganesh Pal's land had been auctioned, the purchaser was Srihari. Ganesh had only a few bighas of land left, on which he was a subtenant.

Srihari had purchased even the homestead of poor Tarini. He had made it a part of his dairy. Tarini's wife had eloped with a peon of the Settlement camp. Tarini was working as a day labourer. His son lived at the junction, begging in the station.

Patu Bayen had forfeited his right to a share of the produce of the trust lands attached to the shrines. He had admitted he did not play the drum any more. He said he did not feel like playing. It had not been necessary to go to court. The Settlement officers had listed the trust land in the official records as part of the zemindar's estate.

Aniruddha's land was to be auctioned soon. Aniruddha was drinking heavily, wandering around like a vagabond. From time to time he went to Durga's. His wife had been nearly out of her mind. She was better now. Durga had spoken to the Assistant Sub-Inspector of Police, and had arranged for the rental of one of the rooms of their house for the detenu.

"I saw Aniruddha's wife today. She was blowing the conch," said Debu.

"Yes, she's much better," said Jaggan. "Since the detenu began to live in her house she has improved a great deal." He curved his lips significantly.

"Many men say, you know, that Jatin Babu and the blacksmith's wife—" Haren added in a low voice.

"Shame, Haren!" Debu protested, "what nonsense you talk!"

"Nonsense! That's what I think too. It can't be true. Jatin calls her mother. She is his 'Ma Moni'," Haren said, adding, "Jatin Babu is very secretive, you know. I couldn't get him to tell the formula for making bombs."

The arrival of Harish and Bhabesh put a stop to the conversation. Haren left a little later.

"Debu, son," said Harish, "come to the pavilion this evening. We meet there nowadays. Srihari entertains his friends. Lights, tobacco, paan. Everything's arranged. Srihari is quite a different person now, you know."

"Yes. Srihari even gives us tea twice a day. What do you make of that?"

Debu learned many other things.

Srihari had built a new school house so that he and his toadies could enjoy the pavilion. The zemindar had donated the land for the school at his suggestion. The Union Board had, at Srihari's urging, granted money for the building. He himself had contributed twenty-five rupees. He had also provided wood for the roof frame straw for thatching and planks for the doors and window.

Srihari's enemies were wild with envy. They circulated damaging reports. But Srihari was above all that. He sat in the pavilion twice a day, surrounded by his friends. His enemies had started a Praja Samity—and a Congress Committee also in order to obstruct him in the discharge of his duties as gomasta. And Debu should not get mixed up in all that.

Tara, the barber, gave Debu even graver information. The zemindar was thinking of disposing off the village to a tenant. Srihari was eager to take it. If he got it, he said, he would build a temple to Siva in place of the shrine. And he would have the pavilion roofed with masonry. There were two new servants in Srihari's house. One woman did the cooking, the other looked after the children.

The women were Harihar's two daughters, Tara said. "The two who went to Calcutta to work as maids, you know. Those two! Chiru is living in high style nowadays. It's a grand affair. The youngest was very thin when she came and pale as a hemp flower. After a time it became known that in Calcutta, you know—don't you?"

Tara hinted that the girl had an abortion. Village society had outcaste them. Srihari intervened on their behalf, obtained pardon for them and gave them shelter in his own house. "Food and clothing for two women and the fancy things that women like—it's not a simple matter, Mashay."

Old Chaudhury spoke only of his own family. He asked Debu

about his life in jail. Then he blessed him, saying, "May you live long, Pandit. See if you can mend matters between Srihari and the doctor. Particularly between Srihari and Aniruddha. Aniruddha's going to the dogs."

Ram Narayan came to say his mother had died. "How are you, Debu Bhai?" he asked.

Brindaban the shopkeeper reported that he had lost a lot of money in the rice business. Ramlal Bhakat of the junction town had also lost heavily. He had, in fact, gone bankrupt.

Old Mukunda displayed a baby, his great grandson whom he was carrying proudly in his arms. "Look at Harendra's son," he said, holding him out to Debu. Harendra was Mukunda's grandson.

In the late afternoon Srihari came himself. He had become quite a personage. He bore no resemblance whatsoever to the Chiru Pal of old who, as a tall and strong-muscled young farmer, had gone around bare-bodied, brandishing his mattock, flaunting his physical prowess with rash bravado, seizing the slightest excuse to use force, encroaching upon other men's land and roughly proclaiming himself to be the foremost man in the village. This Srihari was entirely different. He wore sandals, a long tunic and a shawl. His demeanour was grave and dignified. He was the gomasta of the village and the money-lender. He was the *de facto* master.

"Can I come in, Uncle Debu?" Srihari said smiling.

"Come in, nephew, come in." Debu welcomed him politely. Debu was on the point of going out. He wanted to see Aniruddha and he was anxious to meet Jatin Babu again. Jatin had left him at the pavilion. Debu had not seen Aniruddha since then either. He was said to have become a drunkard who passed his nights at Durga's and even ate his meals at her house. His lands were to be put up for auction. Debu was sorry for Ani Bhai. What had happened to him? Srihari was bound to change. Debu remembered what old Chaudhury had said once, "Pandit, one of Lakshmi's name is Sri. He who is strong of heart, strong of body and strong in mind is endowed with Sri." But Aniruddha had become what he was through poverty. Besides, his wife's illness must have affected him profoundly.

"Come on, Uncle, let's go to the pavilion. We gather there in the evenings nowadays. Tea is ready. Let's go."

Debu could not refuse. Srihari told him many things as they sat together in the pavilion. The school house had been built so the pavilion could be used as their meeting place. The floor of the school was to be cemented soon. He had also been talking

to a doctor and planned to bring him to practice in the village and provide him with a house and food. Jaggan would not do any more. He was a humbug. He did not supply medicine any more. It was just water.

Debu said nothing.

The Settlement had completed two stages of its work. The record of rights had been drawn up and the people concerned consulted. So far there had been no trouble. That there had not been was, he did not deny, entirely due to Debu. "You know, Uncle," he said, "the surveyors, record keepers, peons and everybody else became very polite after your arrest. The time for Section Three has come now. Section Five will follow."

Srihari carefully mentioned that he had seen that Debu's land was entered in the records correctly, that no mistake was made. Even the small plot which had been misappropriated by an employee of the Konkona gentlemen had been recovered. Debu was surprised. Had it really been recovered?

"Why not? The zemindar's records are in my hands! Dasji is a man experienced in such matters. 'Uncle Debu has done a lot of good to the people' I said to him. 'He's broken the tiger's teeth. We ought to do this much for him. And apart from that—'"

Apart from that! Srihari lifted his face skyward and raised his folded hands to his forehead. "I shall do no harm to anyone because God has made me a man. I'll not do anything but good. What a scandal was created over Harihar's two daughters! They had virtually entered their names in the police records in Calcutta, you know. They came home when they got involved in a nasty affair. The village made them outcaste. I had to intervene and give them shelter. People gossip about it. I won't lie to you, Uncle. You're not only my uncle, you're my friend. We studied in school together. In what way am I doing wrong if I keep girls who had almost registered with the police? Tell me."

Srihari placed the nozzle of his pipe in Debu's hand and said, "Take a smoke, Uncle."

"No, thank you, I gave up smoking while I was in jail."

"That's good."

Srihari talked on and on. There was no end to all he had to say. He began to tell Debu how much he had loaned to various people when they badly needed money. He told him who was unable to pay the debt.

Srihari was not to be blamed, was he? It is not against the law to have money, is it? Nor is it a sin. To give a man money when he is in trouble is to do him a good turn. When the time came to recover the debt and the interest on the debt Srihari had to show the ugly side of his nature at times, it was true, but how

could he help that? Didn't he pay income tax on the interest? When he went to court he had to pay court fees, didn't he? And he had to pay a tax to the Union Board for the watchman, didn't he? How could he overlook the interest?

Debu sighed. While Srihari talked he thought of what had happened to his family when he was a boy, how their immovable property had been sold and they had been turned out into the road by the Konkona gentlemen because of his father's debt. He shuddered.

"Now just see. Article Three is coming! The court of Article Five will follow. And the doctor has set up a Praja Samity and is going around declaring that the revenue rates for all the land in this village are permanently fixed and the right to enjoy the land settled. The revenue rate on the lands as a whole, a moujah, has, he says, never been raised. I'll show you the papers for 1270. The right to raise the revenue on the whole is contained in them. Not a single plot will be found to be mokarari. The zemindar is going to exercise his right to raise the revenue rate. There may be trouble. Lawsuits. The zemindar will get what the law entitles him to. What's wrong about that? The price of grain has trebled in the last fifty years. Why shouldn't the zemindar get a share of the benefit?"

Debu could not argue with him. It was true that the price of the crops had risen but it was also true that the tenants were not any better off than before since their income had not risen proportionately. To raise the rent of the lands on top of everything else!

"Listen to me, Uncle! You've suffered a great deal. Don't take any more risks. Do your work and eat your food. Help others. People expect a great deal from you. The Assistant Sub-Inspector of police said to me this morning, "Ghosh, tell the Pandit not to run any more risks. Tell him to sign a bond. The police won't trouble you any more if you sign a bond. The job in the school is yours. You'll get it back as soon as you sign a bond. And don't be too friendly with that detenu fellow. Do you understand me?"

"I understand," Debu smiled.

"Then come with me to-morrow."

"No, I can't do that, Chiru. I didn't do anything wrong."

"You're not doing the right thing now, Uncle. Think it over for a day or two."

"All right." Debu laughed and stood up. As he came out of the pavilion several people came up and bowed.

"Who is it? Satish?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you want?"

"Please come with us."

"Why? What's the matter?"

"We have come to take you to the Ghentu songs."

"Not today, Satish. Some other time."

"The party has been arranged especially for you, sir," Satish said in a whisper. He added, "The detenu Babu has come. He's waiting. The doctor too."

"The detenu is there?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, then. Let's go."

The Ghantakarna Puja takes place in the month of Chaitra. The Ghentu, as it is called locally, is not the same as the Puja described in the almanac. The Ghantakarna of the almanac is intended to prevent small pox by appealing to a powerful deity of that name. Ghentu, or the local Ghantakarna, is part of the ceremonies associated with the Gajon or annual festival of Siva. Ghantakarna was a devotee of Siva and the enemy of Vishnu. He was an evil spirit, but so successful was the spiritual training he undertook that he won the favour of both Rudra and Vishnu. He is worshipped by people of low caste. They go from house to house singing songs about Ghentu the whole month. In return they are given rice, pulses and hashish. These they use to celebrate the Gajon.

People had gathered beneath the great bokul tree at Dharma-raj Tola. It was a Chaitra evening, and the scent of bokul blossoms filled the whole area. The moon hung brightly in the sky for it was the twelfth night of the waxing moon. Women sat on one side and men on the other. Between them sat the doctor, the detenu, Haren and the pandit on camp stools.

Debu had come here to listen to the singing of songs about Ghentu Ghantakarna Puja as a child. Debu remembered that parties had been held in the moonlight just like this. He had filled his shirt tail with bokul flowers before he went home after the singing. Satish, a young man then, had been one of the singers. The older people joined in on the refrain. The parties had been well attended in those days.

"This is not what it was in the old days, Satish," said Debu.

"More than a fourth of the men haven't come yet, Pandit Mashay," answered Satish.

"Why? Where are they?"

"They have to work in other villages now. There aren't enough jobs here any more. Farmers have grown poorer. They don't hire as many labourers as they used to. The number of our children has increased. It's late before the men get home in the

evenings. They have far to come. When do they have time to listen to songs or sing them?"

"Your stomachs are on fire, never satisfied," said the doctor.

"What you say is true, Doctor Babu," Satish answered with folded hands. "Even women have to go out to work nowadays. They're paid by the day. What are we to do, tell me? I called a meeting of our Council and the women were forbidden to work. Nobody paid any attention. Off the girls go to work and the times are so hard!"

"Come. Come. On with the singing." Jatin interrupted him.

The singers and drummers were waiting. They began. Timbrels rang out with the drums. The singers sang:

Siv! Siv! Ram! Ram!

A chorus of young boys clapped their hands and swayed, taking up the refrain.

Siv! Siv! Ram! Ram!

The singers went on:

Ghentu was one
with seven sons.
The seven sons
were fifty-seven.
One son was an abbot.
Brother Abbot, re,
let's pick flowers, re,
to deck my Ghentu!

At the end of every line the children clapped and sang:

Siv! Siv! Ram! Ram!

Another song started as soon as they
to compose songs about local ever
the Mayurakshi River:

Alas! Alas! Where has
this water all come from?
Where was all this water?
The land of Bengal is
washed away, washed away!
Ah! Ah! Away! Ah!

A song had been composed when the railroad first came to that part of the country. They sang it that day again.

Sahebs laid the tracks.
The mechanical cart goes
a six months' journey
in an instant of time.

And a song from a bad year:

The gods have sent a drought.
Clouds are in the Northeast.
Give me a wad of tobacco.
I've brought my pipe with me.

Then they sang:

When the survey came
to this part of the country
the hearts of young and old,
tenants and masters -
beat swiftly, beat, beat!

The boys chanted:

Hai! Hai! What can we do?
We may save our lives but
our honour will not survive!

The singers went on:

Peons came, surveyors came,
and the record keepers!
Make a vow to Father Siv,
pledge a sacrifice to him!
Our honour may not survive!
The Hakim came on horseback
With him came the Peshkar!
The soul of the country round
fled from out its cage!
Our honour may not survive.
Carts of tents and chairs,
loads of tables and papers
and a heavy iron chain
weighing forty maunds. Forty maunds!
We fear, we fear, that in our fields
no grain will remain, no grain!

Their eyes are red and bright as stars
 They grind their teeth and roar, "You ape!"
 They work the coolies all to the death!
 Setting stakes here, setting stakes there
 they peer through a telescope on
 a three-legged stool. A three-legged stool!
 Alas! Why doesn't the earth
 swallow them up! Swallow them up!

Strong of heart is Debu Babu,
 A pandit learned and wise.
 Honour is dearer than life!
 He could not bear, he could not bear
 the goings-on! The goings-on!
 When a record keeper was rude
 Debu Babu snubbed him too. Snubbed him too!
 "No force with me," he cried, "no force!"
 Debu was afraid of none. Of none!

The iron chain of forty maunds
 rattled loudly, rattled loudly
 as it was dragged over his grain,
 dragged over Debu Ghosh's grain!
 Debu Ghosh did not submit, submit.
 To no one does Debu Ghosh submit.

Debu smiled, "What's all this, Satish?"
 Jatin was listening with delight. The singers went on to describe what followed:

The policemen tied up Debu Ghosh.
 He was told to apologise
 to the nasty record keeper.
 "No," said Debu Ghosh. He smiled.
 Brave Debu Ghosh did not weaken
 though his wife, as fair as gold, as gold,
 was left behind with his babe, his babe,
 baby boy as soft as butter!
 Brave Debu Ghosh did not weaken!

Durga was wiping her eyes. "You've a heart of stone, you have," she cried. What a day that was! What a day! All the women were wiping their eyes. They had not forgotten:

With a garland round his neck
 Debu Ghosh went off to jail,

Debu Ghosh went off to jail.
Only a god could have done
what Debu did, what Debu did.
I, Satish, bow to his feet,
I bow to Debu Ghosh's feet.

The song came to an end. Satish came up and touched Debu's feet. Debu was profoundly moved. A wave of emotion surged up in his breast. He could not say a word. He took Satish in his arms and lifted him to his feet.

"I'll give you a medal, Satish!" exclaimed the doctor.

"You forgot to mention me," Haren said with chagrin. "I brought the garland, didn't I?"

Jatin stood up as in a dream. The song had thrilled him. Admiration for Satish filled his heart. "Will you write your song down for me, Satish?" he asked.

"Sir?" Satish grinned in embarrassment. "Write it down?"

"Yes."

"Really, sir?"

"Yes, heh, Satish."

Satish's smile widened. Slowly his whole face suffused with happiness. He was rewarded.

"I haven't been able to make your acquaintance today," said Debu. "Tomorrow—"

"Acquaintance" We know each other. Some long talks are what we need. I'll come to your house tomorrow."

Chapter 19

FOR a day Sivkalipur showed itself to Debu in a wonderful and moving guise. He not only saw it, he felt the touch of it, tasted the flavour of it. It was full of sweetness, warmth, tenderness. A single day. From the very next morning Sivkalipur was its old, familiar self. The people were as spiteful as before, as base, as envious, as poor. The village was as poverty-stricken, as sorrow-laden, as riddled with disease. The magic had vanished. Of the contentment Debu had felt when the fragrance

of late mangoes came to him, of the loveliness he had beheld in the trees, creepers, flowers, birds, nothing remained.

Debu thought disconnectedly of many things as he sat on the porch of his house. He thought of the dust, of a pond that was drying up. The water plants had begun to rot, their stench filling the air. Water was already scarce. Both men and animals would suffer for want of water during the next two months. Water would be required daily for the many plants around his house. What was the good of planting anything more? Three large pumpkins had been stolen from the vine on the garden wall the night before. The cowherd who had planted the vine was cursing the unknown thief. The cowherd was asking for his wages and for clothes. Bilu's clothes were in tatters. He needed new clothes for himself. The money in the post office savings account had been exhausted.

The rough hard voices of people quarrelling had risen near by in shrill vituperation. One of the voices seemed to be Ranga Didi's. "What's wrong?" he asked Bilu. "Who is Ranga Didi quarrelling with? Do you know?"

"Nobody," said Bilu smiling, "she's swearing at her ancestors and her gods. She does it first thing every morning nowadays. She's growing old, and it is hard for her to do all her work herself. This is the way she finds relief. She calls her father a bamboo-chested devil, who tucked all the land away in his own stomach! She curses God saying, 'Go blind, you devourer of eyesight!'"

Debu smiled. "There's some one else," he said, "with a voice like a metal gong."

"That's Padma, the blacksmith's wife."

"Aniruddha's wife?"

"Yes. She's probably cursing our nephew, Srihari Ghosh. She does it every now and then. That seems to be what's she's doing today. She was almost out of her mind for a while though she's better now. Karmakar can't do much work any more. He's become unemployable! The things he does when he's drunk! He stalks around with an iron bludgeon shouting, 'I'll murder you! I'll murder you!' He goes to all sorts of houses."

"You mean Durga's?"

"Yes."

"Shame! Durga'll never get over doing such things! It spoils all her good qualities!"

"What can Durga do if the drunken fool goes around making trouble? Of course he used to stay the nights at her house but Durga doesn't let him in any more. Karmakar sleeps in the courtyard or in the orchard. Sometimes on the road. Occasionally he goes somewhere else."

"Yes, I suppose so. Aniruddha hasn't any money nowadays and Durga—"

"No-no-no, don't say that. Durga never took money from Aniruddha. It was Aniruddha who took money from her. She gave him three or four rupees now and then. She put the money into my hands and asked me to give it to Padma. Padma would not accept it from Durga."

"Did you get mixed up in that sort of thing? Shame!"

Bilu stood with her head bowed. She did not speak for some time. Then she said, "What else could I do? Padma had nothing to eat and she was quite crazy. I wasn't in a position to help her myself. One day Durga begged me to do it. How could I refuse?"

"Huh," Debu remembered. "Wasn't it Durga who persuaded the police to rent one of Aniruddha's rooms for the detenu? That's what I heard."

"Yes, the detenu is an extremely nice person. He calls Padma, Ma Moni. All the children in the village love him. They crowd around him."

"I want to talk to Jatin Babu, Bilu."

Srihari called to him as he passed the pavilion. A number of people were sitting around him. Debu guessed that the collection of revenue rent was in progress. The twenty-eighth of March falls on the twelfth or thirteenth of Chaitra. It is the last day for the payment of government dues. The Chaitra quarter was also closing.

"I'll come this afternoon, nephew," Debu said.

"Five minutes," Srihari demanded. "Take a look at what is happening in this village. It's near anarchy."

Debu entered the pavilion. He saw Nelo, the young Bairagi boy, standing with folded hands. His mother was crying on one side.

"Look at what the fellow has done!" Srihari pointed indignantly at one of the pillars. A picture of Kali had been drawn in charcoal on the white plaster.

"Did you draw it, Nelo?" Debu asked.

Nelo nodded in silence. He had.

"Just see how he has spoiled the plaster in the temple pavilion!" Srihari cried. Then he turned to Nelo, "Pay the price of a fresh plastering! Then you can go."

Debu had been studying the drawing. Nelo drew well. "Where did you learn to draw like that, Nelo?" he asked.

"By myself!" Nelo answered in a hurt voice, speaking with difficulty.

"You learned all by yourself?"

"Yes, yes," Srihari interrupted. "The fellow does nothing

else! He marks up everything, people's courtyards, walls, cement surfaces, everything he sees! He even defaces the trunks of trees. And that detenu had turned his head properly. You should see the walls of Aniruddha's house where he lives! They're covered with his scribbling! Now he's started on the pavilion. He did this yesterday noon."

"The drawing is nice," laughed Debu, "although Nelo was wrong to do it here, of course. The representation of Kali is excellent!"

"Namashkar, Ghosh Mashay!" Jatin mounted the steps and entered the pavilion. When he saw Debu he said, "I was on my way to your house."

"And I was on my way to see you!"

"A minute. Let me attend to this. Ghosh Mashay, how much will it cost to whitewash the pillar?"

"It won't cost much. The point is that Nelo must be punished."

"I've asked two or three people," Jatin smiled, "they told me the lime would cost four annas. The workman will charge four annas for half a day's work. His helper will charge two annas. It adds up to ten annas, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but some jute cloth will be needed for wiping up."

"All right. Two annas for that. Twelve annas." Jatin took a rupee note out of his pocket and placed it in front of Srihari. "You may send me the change," he said.

Jatin rose. Debu also stood up. "Come with me, Debu Babu," Jatin smiled, "there are lots of Nelo's drawings in my house. You can have a look at them. Come with us, Nelo."

"Uncle, just a word," Srihari called.

"What is it?" Debu looked back.

"Come over here, will you? There are things that can't be said in front of everybody."

Srihari drew Debu aside. "Your rent hasn't been paid since last Chaitra," he said, standing at the Shasti Tola. "Your dues for the whole year are pending, Uncle. You should do something about it while there is still time."

Debu's face fell instantly. He remembered the conversation of the day before. Srihari evidently wished to bring him to heel. "All right, I'll pay," he said with forced calm. "I'll pay on time."

The Detention Act of 1924 was passed by the exercise of Special Powers. This act made possible the detention of Bengali young men who were political suspects, within a prescribed area in the vicinity of a police station. Jatin had been placed under surveillance by the Bengal Government, in accordance with this

act. Jatin was not more than seventeen or eighteen years old, on the threshold of manhood. His skin was dark and sleek, his hair long and unruly. He was slender. An attractive grace emanated from his person. His eyes were very bright. Behind his spectacles they looked even larger and brighter.

The porch outside Jatin's room was the place where he met and chatted with his friends. The boys of the village spent most of their time there. Among the older men who were frequent visitors were Dwarka Chaudhury, Tara, the barber, Girish, the carpenter, and the opium addict, Gadai Pal. Brindaban Dutta came in the evenings after his shop was closed. Tarini came. Tarini was keeping himself barely alive by working as a day labourer. Even Srihari sometimes stopped at Jatin's for a minute as he came and went about his business. The Bauris and Bayens came. The village women watched the proceedings from a distance. Ranga Didi made bold to chat with Jatin from time to time. She brought him bananas, sweetmeats and other gifts. For his benefit she would recite to herself a verse from the *Panchali*:

Stony-hearted God, you left Jasoda's lap
Empty when you took her golden Gopal away.

Jatin liked poetry. He recited verses to himself often. During the time he spent in this village two lines from Tagore came to him over and over again:

I have a home in every place
I have kin in every home.

Within the narrow confines of this small village, Jatin had found the whole of Bengal. It had become his home as soon as he set foot in it. Every person in it seemed near and dear to him, the closest of kin. The way this had come about amazed. He was a city boy. His home was in Calcutta. He had never seen a village before. When he was arrested under the act he was at first kept in jail. Then he was placed in various district towns. Sub-divisional towns came next. These sub-divisional towns were strange places. The influence of the village was much in evidence, large areas were still open, and agriculture played an important part in the lives of the people, perhaps the most important part. There was a small society. It was less a society than a loose collection of partisan groups formed around education, social status or economic levels. These were narrow, self-centred, malicious. The presence of the village was felt more than seen, like the canvas beneath the oil colours of a painting. Its existence was assumed.

Jatin had been alarmed when orders were passed to place him in a real village. He was speedily reassured, for wherever he

turned he met an affection that surprised and pleased him. Of course he was not blind to the crudeness, the poverty and the spitefulness. The lack of education was painfully obvious. Still, he liked it. The people were not less human for being uneducated. Their ignorance made them timid but they were wholly devoid of the arrogance that comes with wrong or futile schooling. And remnants of a culture that had once been vigorous and alive, a culture that was ancient and honourable, still existed among them.

He loved the city and respected it. It was in the city that progress was being made, that men were advancing. But only in the city proper, the metropolis, not in the small towns with their lawyers and petty shopkeepers, small mill owners, tobacco store-houses and cloth mills. In the city hundreds of chimneys lifted their arms into the sky like sadhus endeavouring to attain heaven. Their strength defied the imagination. It was unlimited. Like chained demons it powered machinery, producing the vast treasure of which men stand so much in need. But Jatin liked the dreamy, enchanted life of the village. The age that was dying was of ancient lineage. It was very different from the age that was coming. Yet it had an appeal, a charm of its own. It moved him, as the leave-taking of the old always moves the new. The welcome it extended to him was to Jatin as poignant as it was sweet.

"Please sit down," Jatin said to Debu, "I'm eager to know you."

"Yesterday you said you did know me," Debu smiled.

Jatin went to the inner door and called, "Ma Moni." He said, "That's true. Now we can talk. Let's have a cup of tea."

Padma was his Ma Moni. This Ma Moni was an invaluable asset but she was a mixture of poison and ambrosia. Her ambrosia was so sweet and her poison so strong, Jatin got out of breath in his efforts to cope with them. The difference in their ages was not great, only six or seven years. But Padma was his Ma Moni just the same. Jatin was reminded of his childhood now and then. In the games he used to play with his elder sister she used to pretend to be his mother. He appeared to be playing the game over again. Padma had been more than half insane when he first came. She fainted frequently, dropping to the floor or the ground of the courtyard. There she lay for some time, completely oblivious of the state of her clothes. Aniruddha was a boulder, wandering around like a vagabond. He was seldom at home. It was Jatin who sprinkled water in Padma's face and made efforts to revive her. He had called her 'Ma Moni' from the start. He could not think what else to call her. And Padma had addressed him as 'Son' one day when she came to. They had

kept up the pretence ever since. It was a game. Padma was much better now. Doing things for her son kept her occupied. She did not seem to think about Aniruddha at all. On the few occasions he put in an appearance she did not pay any special attention to him.

There was a lot of noise in the house at that moment. A number of boys were running about. Padma was tying a cloth over the eyes of one of them. "What does rice do?" she asked

"It boils," answered the boy.

"What do fish do?"

"Splutter and sizzle."

"What's sold in the market?"

"Ginger."

"Then go and find your brothers!"

They were playing Blind Man's Buff. The boys came to Jatin. When he was not at home they played games with Padma. And Padma, in his absence, sat among them happily, pretending to be their goal.

"Ma Moni," Jatin called again.

"What?" Padma stood up. "What command does my son have for me? You who ask for the moon?"

"Put water on the fire for tea, please."

"Certainly not. How many times a day does one drink tea?"

"Debu Ghosh Mashay has come. Shouldn't we offer him tea?"

"The pandit?"

"Yes."

"I'm bringing tea," Padma drew her veil over her face.

"The pandit is outside," said Jatin, laughing. "Who are you veiling yourself for?"

"Oh, that's so." Padma pushed her veil aside in embarrassment, smiling shyly. Jatin went out and said, "I'm having a parcel sent to you by V.P.P."

Debu was disturbed. "V.P.P.?" he asked. What was it? Why to him?

"Some picture books and a box of paints for Nolin. It's a lot of bother to get anything through the police. Nolin has a nice talent. He ought to learn."

"That's all right. But wouldn't it be better for Nolin to study with the image makers, the patuas, and learn how to make images, how to use colours? What do you say, Nolin?"

"The patuas won't teach me. They want money," Nolin was extremely shy. He never spoke more than a word or two. He was staring at the ground.

"I'll pay the fees. Study under them."

"They want two rupees a month."

"All right," said Debu. "I'll talk to Dwijapada Patua about it. Will you go with me?"

Nolin nodded happily. He said nothing for a while. Then he broke out, turning to Jatin, "You said you would give me some money."

Jatin handed him four annas and said, "Go with Pandit Mashay. You will, won't you?"

Nolin nodded again. He would. Then he got up and left without a word.

"Now let's talk," said Jatin. "I've asked many people. Nobody can give me a satisfactory answer. At least their answers don't satisfy me."

"What is it?"

"This temple pavilion. Who owns it?"

"The public."

"But they say it belongs to the zemindar?"

"Not exactly. He looks after it as the trustee of the lands attached to the shrine."

"It seems to me from the little I have heard, that the village people look after it."

"Yes, they do. But the traditional arrangement is as I have described it. It is a matter of prestige for the zemindar. Our village is a sudra village. The zemindar is a Brahmin. So naturally he looks after the shrines. The village is often divided into factions by disputes of various kinds. The zemindar is above such things. He is the trustee for that reason. The public enjoy the right to use it."

"Then why have the zemindar's people objected to the holding of Praja Samity meetings there?"

"Have they?"

"Yes, they did not allow the Samity to meet."

Debu thought over the matter. "Perhaps," he said, "it was because the Praja Samity is opposed to the zemindar. And of course the Praja Samity is not in any way connected with religion."

"The Praja Samity has been founded to promote the welfare of the tenants. Their welfare need not clash with the interests of the zemindar. In the majority of cases no differences will arise. What is good for the tenants is good for the zemindar also. There may, of course, be differences in a few matters. And it is the tenants who have built the pavilion. The zemindar did not build it. Only the land on which it stands belongs to the zemindar. Can't the Praja Samity pass down the public road? And if the pavilion can be used only for religious purposes how can it be used as the gomasta's office and rent collected there? Why are

the police and magistrate seated there when they come to the village on official business?"

Debu was astonished. How had the young man learned so much in such a short time? A doubt stirred in his mind. The ownership of the pavilion was a problem. "I can't answer you today," he said thoughtfully, "I'll think about it."

A light knocking on the inside told Jatin that his Ma Moni was calling. "I can't get up now," he called "Bring the tea here, Ma Moni."

What was the boy thinking of? Padma was extremely annoyed.

"Are you afraid of me?" Debu laughed.

There was no help for it. Padma had to take the tea out to them. She wrapped herself in her long veil and went out. She set the two cups down in front of them and hurried away.

"People who go to the pavilion," Jatin went on, "are being warned not to do this, not to do that. They obey. They don't understand. They're weak, harmless people. The public's right to use the pavilion has certainly not been surrendered to Srihari just because he paid to have the floor cemented."

"What can be done?" Debu was silent for a long time. "Srihari has money. He is now the *de facto* master of the village. He is the zemindar's gomasta, on the same terms as ownership is given. What can you do about it?"

"I'll do nothing. It's not for me to do anything," Jatin laughed. "It's you, Debu Babu, who must do something. Why else were the people looking forward to your return so eagerly?"

Debu stared into Jatin's face.

Jatin was silent too, gazing straight in front of him.

"Babu!" some one called.

"Who is it?" Debu and Jatin both turned round. Durga was standing in the inner door.

"Durga?" asked Debu.

"Yes."

"What news?"

"The blacksmith's wife is asking whether she should light the stove or not. Cooking—"

"Yes. Tell her to light the stove," Jatin answered.

"What do you want to eat?"

"Oh, anything. Tell her to cook anything."

"Tell whom?" Durga asked in astonishment.

"Tell Ma Moni. Or you can do it."

Durga covered her face and laughed. "You're a bit crazy, aren't you, Babu?"

"Why? What's the harm? There's nothing wrong in eating food cooked by anybody who is clean. Caste doesn't matter. Ask the pandit."

"Is that true, Pandit Mashay?"

"A Harijan did the cooking in the jail," answered Debu, looking into Jatin's face. "His name was odd, very odd. Gandhari Hanri."

"It ought to have been Draupadi. Come on. Let's go to the river." Jatin took off his tunic and picked up a towel.

Debu had made up his mind not to get involved in anybody's quarrels. He had taken the resolution in jail. But this boy Jatin was upsetting all his fine plans.

He went home for oil, rubbed it over his body, took a towel and set out for the river. They met Dwarka Chaudhury near the pavilion. He was coming out, tapping his cane. "Are you on your way to the river?" he asked, looking at Jatin.

"Yes," he answered, smiling.

"I've heard you do not use oil. Is that so?"

"No oil, sir."

"Accept my congratulations," Chaudhury bowed slightly.

"No, no, what are you doing, Chaudhury Mashay? I've asked you not to bow to me so often! I'm so much younger!"

"You are a Brahmin, son," answered old Chaudhury with a smile. "Anything holy knows no age."

"In the old days perhaps, not now." Jatin was very embarrassed.

"The times have changed," smiled Chaudhury. "It's true. The old ways have almost entirely disappeared. A few of us old people are still here, relics of the past. Fossils! That's the trouble."

"Tell me stories of the old days," said Jatin. He liked old Chaudhury very much.

"Stories? To you the things that took place long ago are no more than stories? How can they be anything else? And when I join the people of old on the other side of the river all I tell them about what is happening here today will be no more than stories to them! In the old days milk was given away when a new calf was born, utensils were presented to Brahmins at religious ceremonies. It was thought a good deed to plant fruit trees along the roads, to have ponds excavated, to build and consecrate temples and shrines. Our great men aspired to behold the gods. These things are stories to you young men of today. And the planes in the sky, the submarines under the sea, wireless news, two seers of rice per rupee, all kind of new illnesses, the decline in religious aspirations and the slackening of divine activities—these things are stories to the people of old."

"Did you ever have a pond excavated, Chaudhury Mashay?"

"I never did. That's my bad luck. But my father did, son. I was a boy then. Forty cowries for each basket of earth. A man counted the baskets and paid for them in cowries. The cowries were exchanged for money in the evening."

"Half a pice per basket, wasn't it? Why don't you say so!"

"That's right." Chaudhury laughed. "You can understand our way of speaking. It's we who cannot understand you. Tell me, son, what's all this fuss about? Swadeshi? Bombs and pistols? We've always regarded the rule of the British as good, the rule of Rama."

A light flashed momentarily in Jatin's eyes. It went out at once. "I've never seen any pistols or bombs," he said, "but you want to know why a fuss is being made. It's because the days in which it was possible for people to have ponds excavated for the benefit of the village as you have just described, are no more."

The old gentleman was silent for a long time. "I don't quite understand," he said. "Why don't you say something, Pandit?"

"I'll come to see you this afternoon," Chaudhury said after a brief silence.

"To see me?"

"Yes. I've something I want to discuss with you. I can't talk about it to anybody else."

"Tell me now, if it's no inconvenience to you. Why take the trouble to come again?" Debu asked. He was full of curiosity.

"I'll walk on ahead," Jatin said.

"No, no no," old Chaudhury protested. "It's late. That's why. What have I to hide at my age? You may have heard, Pandit. Have you?"

"What? Tell me."

"About the Gajon."

"No, I haven't heard anything."

"The devotees say they won't raise Siva this year."

"They won't raise Siva? Why not?"

"Oh, you weren't here last year, were you? The trouble started then. Siva's trust lands got lost in the Survey."

"Lost?"

"The zemindar's officers could not find them. How could they? The lands have been parcelled out among them. The fund to pay the expenses of the shrines was administered by Mukunda Ghosh. His family received the income from the lands under the traditional agreement. In return for it they saw that services were conducted regularly and religious festivals properly held. Mukunda's father sold the lands. The zemindar disclosed the sale in order to procure exemption from the revenue rent. Mukunda knew nothing about it. He had paid the expenses

regularly. He refused to pay any more when the Survey failed to find the lands. Why should he? Last year the Gajon was held by raising subscriptions. This year the devotees decline to ask for subscriptions. They say it's begging. I came to see Srihari. I asked him how the Gajon was going to be held. I'm still alive! Will I live to see the Gajon discontinued?"

"What did Srihari say?"

"He showed me the zemindar's letter. The zemindar will not pay the expenses. Not even if the Gajon does not take place."

"Huh."

"Patu has stopped drumming since last year. He has surrendered his land. Aniruddha refused to perform the sacrifice last year. He says he won't do it for only one leg of the goat. In the end the lame priest had to do it. This year the lame priest says he must be paid for his services. Pandit, all kinds of trouble have started. We can't do anything about it standing in the road. That is why I said I'll come to your house this afternoon."

"What can I do about it. Chaudhury Mashay?" Debu felt breathless.

"That's not like you, Pandit!" he answered. "If a man like you doesn't do anything, who will?"

Debu was silent.

Chaudhury left them when they came to the Kalipur road. Debu and Jatin crossed the fields and went down to the Mayurakshi River. Debu bathed in silence. He did not speak on the way back to the village. Jatin tried to start a conversation three or four times. Seeing that Debu did not answer he contented himself with reciting in a low voice:

My heart, having lost
those closest to me,
wanders through the sky.
How am I to tell you
the way it calls to me?
Have I too not lain for ages
beneath the dust, like grass?

When he came home, Jatin found Padma lying unconscious on the ground in the mud of the courtyard. Durga was fanning her. She was also covered from head to foot with mud. Aniruddha was sitting on the porch, drunk. He was mumbling to himself with his head bowed to his chest. There was no sign of any cooking having been done.

"The blacksmith's wife," Durga explained, "turned on me furiously after you left. She told me to get out of the house. We exchanged some words. I had just left when I heard the sound of a fall. I looked back and saw her lying here. I came back, sprinkled water in her face and began to fan her. She's not come to yet. Karmakar came quite unexpectedly a few minutes ago. He shouted and stamped around for a while and then sat down over there. Look at him! He'll fall on his face any minute now."

"Aniruddha!" Debu shook him.

"Aya—!" Aniruddha roared, and opened his eyes. Then he recognised Debu and became polite. "Oh, it's you, is it, Pandit?"

"Yes. Can you understand what I say?"

"Of course. I'll listen to you. A hundred times!" He burst into tears. "See how unlucky I am, Pandit! Just see! You're my friend. The best man in the village. A good man. Somebody worth remembering, you are! Look how I'm being punished! I'm a fakir! And look at Padma! Just see the state she's in!"

"Go and fetch the doctor, Aniruddha. Call Jaggan."

"What can the doctor do, Bhai?" Aniruddha's voice was hard. "This is Chiru's doing! Where is my cleaver? My cleaver. I'll kill him. And Durga too. And Padma. Durga won't let me in her house, Pandit. She doesn't even speak to me."

Aniruddha began to swear obscenely. Durga sat with her head bowed, in silence.

"Jatin Babu," Debu said, "come home with me. Lunch with us today. We'll inform the doctor."

Aniruddha started again as soon as Debu and Jatin had left the house. "And I'll kill that detenu fellow, that Jatin Babu. Him first of all. He has—my house—"

"See here, Karmakar," Durga hissed. "It won't be good for you. I tell you. Don't say bad things about good people."

Aniruddha beat his head cruelly on the door post. "O—ee! Take that! O—ee! And that! O—ee! And that!"

Durga did not even ask him to stop.

Chapter 20

"Eight in Falgun, eight in Chaitra
Use a bill hook to cut the sesamum."

If sesamum is sown between the first week of Falgun and the first week of Chaitra the crop is so heavy that a scythe cannot go through it. A bill hook is needed to cut it. This year the sowing had been late. The sesamum was just beginning to flower. The crop would not be ready for harvesting before the first week of Baishakh. It would be a poor one.

Debu was coming back from the fields in the early morning. There had been no rain this year since the end of Magh. The sugar cane had not yet been planted. The river had dwindled to a thin stream of water that flowed on the opposite side of the river bed, close to the town. If an earthen dam, at least seven feet high, were thrown across it the water could be brought to the fields. But building of a such a dam would be a lot of trouble. Who was to do it? It would not be possible unless the people of two or three villages co-operated. If sugar cane could be planted now it would grow well and be two or three feet high before the monsoon set in. Potols had not been planted either. "The potol crop doubles when planted in Falgun." So the saying runs. Srihari had planted everything, even sugar cane and potols. He had two or three wells on his own land and was irrigating his fields with water from them. Bhabesh and Hatish used his wells too.

Debu began to think of sinking a well.

How could they manage without sugar cane? There was no hope now for potols. How could they do without molasses in the house? Water is easily available in the riverbed. It is not necessary to dig deep. Ten or twelve feet is enough. It would cost about fifteen rupees. But all his money was exhausted. Money had been borrowed. There were debts to be paid. Sri-

hari's wife had loaned Bilu money secretly. Purchases had been made from shops in the town on credit through Durga. The rice crop had not been satisfactory. Debu did not dare to sell the little grain they had. The monsoon would soon be here and the ploughing and planting season would start. Money would be required both for the fields and for the household. Debu's responsibilities were heavy and he had many things to think of. The wheat and barley crops had been poor and all he had was thirty seers of barley and a maund and a half of wheat. The whole of the pulse crop would be needed at home. Since he no longer taught in the school, the fixed monthly cash income he had received as salary was gone. What was he to do? Yet the whole village seemed to be appealing to him. It was asking him to help with all its thousands of problems. He remembered what Jatin had said, what Dwarka Chaudhury had said.

As he entered the village he came face to face with the watchman, Bhupal, his official badge hanging over his shoulder. Bhupal touched his feet.

Debu returned his greeting and was going on his way when Bhupal called out to him, "Pandit Mashay!"

"Do you wish to say something to me?"

"Yes, sir. I've come from your house."

"What do you want?"

"Land rent and the Union Board tax."

"All right. You'll get it."

"Spoken like a man!" Bhupal was pleased. "How good it is to hear it! The doctor almost hit me. Ghosal said he would not pay. The others hide in their houses. The women say they aren't at home. And I get a scolding."

"Bhupal, what can people do if they can't pay? They have to hide." Debu laughed.

"Right you are! What you say is true." Bhupal sighed and continued, "Who has anything? The whole of the rice crop was swallowed up by Srihari's granaries. It went to pay debts incurred during the rains. How can anybody pay taxes or revenue? Tell me! But what am I to do? This is a deadly job."

When he came home Debu found that Bilu had made tea for him. He was astonished. What was this?

"Is it all right?" Bilu asked shyly. "I asked Padma to teach me how to make it. She makes it for the detenu."

"That may be. But who asked you to make tea for me?"

"Didn't you say you used to drink tea with the political prisoners when you were in jail?"

"I did. But that doesn't mean I have to keep on drinking tea at home. Don't add to our expenses just now, Bilu."

"All right. I've bought a packet. We won't buy any more when it's finished."

"A whole packet of tea?"

"Durga bought it yesterday in the evening."

Debu felt like turning the bowl of tea upside down, but restrained himself so as not to hurt Bilu. "No more tea from tomorrow," he said. "I'll drink it today. Put the packet aside. You can make tea for guests who like it or we can have a cup whenever we catch chill or a cold."

"No."

"Why not?" Debu was surprised.

"You'll miss it."

"No, I won't."

"You will. I know."

"Do you know more about me than I do?" Debu was both surprised and annoyed.

"Oh, very well then. I won't make tea!" Bilu's eyes filled with tears. She turned her face away and left him.

Debu sighed. This was the first difference that had ever risen in their married life. The pain of having hurt Bilu echoed in his own heart.

"Master!" Debu's peasant came up.

"What is it, re?"

"We've got to have a new mattock. We can't manage with the old one any more."

"Can't it be repaired? Must we buy a new one?"

"No, sir. We needed a new one last year, but we managed to carry on because you were away. It's worn down to the butt. We can't even turn fertiliser with it."

"Are you turning the manure? Are you giving it plenty of water? Let's have a look at it."

Manure is turned in the pits during the month of Chaitra. Old waste is brought to the top and new waste is put at the bottom. It is heavily watered at this time. The old waste is ready for the fields. The kisan showed him the mattock. It was really very worn and quite small. For field work it was entirely useless. A large mattock was required. The mattocks that were used in the fields in the old days did not weigh less than ten pounds. The peasants were strong. Some could even swing a mattock weighing fourteen or fifteen pounds.

"All right. A mattock," Debu agreed. "Shall we buy a ready-made one or have one made?"

"The ready-made ones are cheaper but they're not so strong."

"Where is a blacksmith to be found? Aniruddha can't be

relied on any more. Other smiths will take their time. We may not get it for several months."

"Buy a ready-made one from the market then, sir. We need some jute fibre too. And a rope to fasten the oxen to the yoke. The cowherd wants a new tethering rope too."

Debu was glad to have something to do. The twisting of jute fibre into rope is usually done by old men in a village or by others who have nothing else to do. Debu sat down at once. As he worked he pondered. What was he to do?

"There was something else I wanted to say, Master Mashay." The peasant came up again.

"What is it?"

"All the neighbours are going to come to you. They asked me to let you know."

"Why? What about?"

"We usually thatch the temple pavilion free. This year the doctor and Ghosal—their committee—are advising us to demand payment. Why should we work for nothing? The temple pavilion is the property of the zemindar. The zemindar must pay."

Debu said nothing. He was thinking of the future as he twisted the rope, busying himself with his own work. He was thinking of opening a shop. How could he manage if he didn't do something?"

"So that's what we're thinking," the peasant went on. "The doctor's advice is good. The pavilion is used as the zemindar's office and for meetings. What does that have to do with us? Why should we work for nothing? And Ghosh keeps on sending for us. When will we go to thatch the pavilion? Ghosh Mashay is an important man, the gomasta. How can we overlook his wishes? The shrines belong to the deity of the whole village. We want to talk it over with you. That's why people are coming. They'll do what you tell them to."

Debu's breath caught in his throat the way it did the day before.

"Master?" the peasant asked after waiting for some time.

"I can't say anything just now, Notan," Debu answered.

"We'll do what you tell us. That's been decided." The peasant stood up. The rope turned and turned in Debu's hands. He stared in front of him.

The pavilion was full of people, for revenue was being collected. Srihari was settling his accounts with his own debtors too. It was the last quarter at the end of the year. Defaulters would be dragged to court. Srihari's accounts, minus the sums paid, would be carried forward into the new year. Interest that

was due would be added to the original debt and consolidated. Those who paid nothing now would have to pay interest on the whole next year.

Srihari's cowsheds were being thatched. Most of the farmers had completed their thatching, doing the work themselves with the help of their hired hands and cowherds. Debu also knew something about thatching. His house needed new thatch too this year. He sighed.

"Salaam, Panditji!" Ichchu Shekh was walking down the road. With him were a number of others, including two servants with staves. He stopped when he saw Debu. His companions echoed his greeting. "Salaam!"

"Salaam!" Debu returned his greeting. "How are you, Ichchu Bhai? Are you well?"

"Yes. How are you?"

"Fine. Thank you."

"We've salaamed you in our hearts thousands of times! Yes. You are a worthy son of a worthy father. We often speak of you in the mosque. Khalef Saheb, Manu Miyah and Golam Mirza and I will come to see you some day."

"Where have you been?" asked Debu, changing the subject.

"To the village. Goats and cows are sold at this time of the year and this is a business centre for me. So I came with money. There're not many buyers left now. Buying has almost stopped. One of your oxen is old, Pandit Mashay. Why don't you sell it?"

"Not this time. Ichchu Bhai."

"Take a loan. Give me the old ox. You can pay the balance later. Or let me have some grain. A grain dealer is with me."

"No, Bhai." Debu smiled.

"Very well then."

Ichchu and his companions salaamed and went on their way. Ichchu was an experienced dealer. He always turned up when people were in need of money, bringing cash with him. He knew the value of every goat and cow the villagers possessed. But why should Manu Miyah, Khalef Saheb and Golam Mirza want to see him? He felt most uncomfortable. They were well-to-do people, big grain dealers.

"Take him, Master," said the cowherd. He set Debu's son down at his feet. "He won't let go of me. He wants to go to the pasture with me." The cowherd giggled and said to the baby, "Learn to read and write from your Daddy. Why do you want to tend cows? Shame!"

Debu gathered the baby eagerly into his arms.

"What're you doing, Pundit?" Aniruddha came up, carrying an axe. He was, for once, sober. His breath smelt slightly of liquor but he was not drunk.

"Are you yourself again, Ani Bhai?" asked Debu with a smile.

Aniruddha laughed. "I did have a drop too much yesterday," he confessed without a trace of shame.

"Shame! Ani Bhai, shame!"

Aniruddha said nothing for some time. Then he grinned and said, "You don't know, Debu Bhai. You've never tasted it. You won't understand."

"Your land is up for auction or has already been auctioned. Your wife is sick. And here you are wandering drunkenly around, wasting money," Debu reproved him.

"I don't spend much money. I drink rice wine now. And I came to talk about my land. As for sickness at home, how much can I put up with?"

"You weren't like this, Ani Bhai!"

"Who knows? I've always taken a nip now and then. I don't see anything wrong in it."

"Don't you? You've given up your ancestral trade. You're drinking rice wine like low caste fellows. You sleep anywhere and everywhere. And you eat—!"

"What can I do? Who buys the knives and razors and bolts and screws Ani makes? Mattocks, axes, ploughshares are all sold in the market nowadays, much cheaper than I can make them. Nobody gives me any rice any more. What can I do? Rice wine? I haven't money to buy anything else."

"What are you to do? Have you no sense, Ani Bhai? Have you lost that too?"

"Who knows?"

"Do you spend your nights at Durga's, Ani Bhai? Do you have your meals there?"

"Don't mention her name to me, Pandit! Durga won't let me in any more. Ungrateful devil!"

Aniruddha's unashamed confession silenced Debu.

"Do you know, Pandit," he went on, "I'd have given my life for Durga. I still can. Durga sent for me of her own accord. My wife was almost out of her mind. Durga nursed her for a time. Why should I lie? She even helped me with money. The daroga was an old customer of hers. She arranged with him to rent out one of the rooms to the detenu. Ten rupees a month. But Durga is easily infatuated with whoever takes her fancy. She loves wherever she likes. Now she's after the detenu."

"Shame, Aniruddha! Shame!"

"I don't blame Jatin Babu. He's a good boy, a very good

boy. He comes of a good family. He calls Padma his Ma Moni. I've tested him. Why doesn't Durga die? Now, hear what I've come about. My land is being put up to auction. Sell it for me! I'll take whatever I can get. But try. Take a little trouble over it."

"Sell it?"

"Yes. For what is left after the rent is paid."

"And after that?"

"I'll find something to do. I'm not going to pay any rent to Chiru gomasta."

"Don't be foolish, Ani Bhai."

"Foolish? Shall I let it be auctioned then?"

"Find the money to pay your dues. Or sell only as much as you have to. Borrow if you can."

"Debu Bhai," Aniruddha said after a long time. "It breaks my heart to think of parting with my father's land. Do you know, Pandit, in my grandfather's day those four bighas were divided into seven plots. My grandfather turned them into three. My father made them into two, a plot of three and a half bighas and a narrow strip of ten cottahs. I've turned the two into one, a four bigha field."

Big tears dropped from his eyes.

"Don't cry, Ani Bhai. You're a man. You're young. You're strong. You won't lack anything if you work."

"The only way out is to take work in a factory. The trade of blacksmith is no good any more, no matter how many tons of iron I pound, I'll have to find work in a factory. Durga once told me that but I didn't listen to her. Am I to become a factory coolie? I'm the son of Kesav Karmakar, the blacksmith, the grandson of Hritu Karmakar, the blacksmith. Shall I be lost in a crowd of nondescript factory coolies? You know, Debu, I can forge a bill hook that will sever the neck of a tiger at a single blow!"

"Who wants to cut a tiger's throat?" Debu joked. "What will people do with a bill hook like that? You've making a mistake, Aniruddha."

Aniruddha laughed.

"See if you can raise the money to redeem your land, Ani Bhai. The land must be kept. Then put your heart into your work. You can work in a factory for the present. What's the harm?"

"Let me try," said Aniruddha. after thinking it over.

Aniruddha did not go home when he left Debu. He did not like to stay at home. Padma did not want him; he did not want

Padma. He had never been much of a puritan but he had loved Padma. His digressions were whimsical, temporary affairs; he took a wild delight of satisfying a lustful impulse. The misfortune which had struck him so suddenly had changed his life. Durga had come to stand beside him in the midst of his trouble and had given him genuine love. She was not only a seductress. She cared for him and showed her concern in many ways. She had even helped him with money.

Durga satisfied Aniruddha in a way Padma had never been able to do even when she had been strong and healthy and full of youthful passion and love. Padma wore a bunch of madulis round her neck. It always irritated Aniruddha. With her vows and rites and excessive fear of defilement Padma had kept him at a distance, treating him at times almost like an untouchable. Her love was compounded largely of compassion. That tormented Aniruddha. She had never thrown herself upon his breast with the passionate abandon of Durga. After spending the whole day in the heat of the fire of his forge he usually had a drink on the way home. But however excited he felt or hot his passion it cooled at once when he stood in front of Padma.

Durga warmed as well as cooled. She was both fire and water. Her youth had the flavour of an impetuous and eager woman. It drove Aniruddha wild. Durga had taken him by the hand when the smithy was on the point of closing down for lack of work. Aniruddha, to forget the greyness that was engulfing his life, had begun to drink more heavily and to drink cheap wine. There was nothing else for him to do. He surrendered himself utterly to Durga. But Durga had pulled away from him one day, giving him up for a new love. Durga was a husk fire. Durga was a mirage. She was stony-hearted. She was an enchantress, a betrayer.

Aniruddha, in his absentmindedness, had made his way to the Bayen neighbourhood. There was Durga's house. Durga herself was standing in the courtyard, measuring milk. She would sell it as she did every day.

Aniruddha passed the house quickly and emerged in the fields. Durga had abandoned him. Why should he follow her around? He'd give her up too. Debu's was the right advice. Aniruddha seemed to realise how much he had altered for the worse. Shame! Shame! The son of Kesav Karmakar, the grandson of Hitu Karmakar was passing his time among cobblers and drummers, hungry for a drop of affection from one of their women—a fallen woman! Was he not strong? Young? Able? A smith well-known for the soundness of his work?

He laughed aloud. Blacksmiths were no longer esteemed by anybody. The cheap, imported knives and other iron imple-

ments that were sold in the market place had reduced the village blacksmith's status. He sighed. No honour for him. No name for him. Would he be able to work as an anonymous mechanic in a factory or mill, tightening bolts and tapping around with his hammer? Yet the land had to be saved. His grandfather and his father had tilled that land with their own hands, by the sweat of their brow. So had Aniruddha. The grain that had been stolen had been planted with his own hands! It was good, golden grain, mother grain, the goddess Annapurna herself. The land was low-lying, well-watered. Lakshmi!

The vision of four bighas of ripe golden grain rose before his eyes. The grain spread over the empty fields. Aniruddha began to walk. At last he sat down on the ridge of his own plot, beneath the elephant apple tree his grandfather had planted. Aniruddha had sat beneath it when, as a boy, he brought lunch for his father and the hired hands. He usually carried salt with him after a bout of fever, to eat with the tart fruit which tasted especially good then. It also made a delicious chutney, mashed up with oil and salt. Rice from this plot of land had been used in every ceremony that had taken place in his house for generations. Aniruddha made up his mind to keep it at all cost.

He went on, turning in the direction of Akuliya village. Kabuli Chaudhury lived there. Chaudhury, a school teacher in Konkona, lent money on interest. His name was Tyalaram but he was called Kabuli because of the high rate of interest he charged and the kind of pressure he put on his debtors. Some called him 'Python.' Nobody had ever escaped his coils! There were people who even called him 'Murderer!' He had, people said, actually killed a thief once. Kabuli Chaudhury would lend Aniruddha the money he needed so badly if he was given good security. Aniruddha walked towards his house.

Chaudhury was educated, a graduate. He had also passed some Sanskrit examination. He was the Head Pandit of the school. His chief talent, however, was for arithmetic. He did not need pencil and paper to calculate interest. He could calculate interest over a period of twenty years in his head. But he always quoted a few Sanskrit verses as he added the interest due to the original debt, consolidating it into a single total. His calculations were surrounded with an aura of mystical philosophy.

"I'll pay you the money on time, Chaudhury Mashay. I'm not a man to default. I'll keep my word. And I'm not the man to evade you."

"You can't do that, son. Where can you run away to?" Chaudhury recited a Sanskrit verse:

*giyou kalapi gagane ch megho
lakshantareharka salile oh padmam*

"The clouds reside in the sky, Aniruddha, and the peacock lives on the ground. They are far apart from each other. But peacocks have to come out and spread their tails whenever the clouds appear. The sun lives in the heavens and the lotus bud in the water. But the lotus has to open its petals whenever the sun appears. The relationship between a debtor and a moneylender is like that. You'll have to come. How can you escape me?"

Aniruddha did not understand. It went over his head. He showed his teeth in a smile.

"If I give you forty rupees per bigha, your debt will come to sixty rupees in three years' time," Chaudhury calculated. "The moneylender doesn't gain much, does he, if court expenses are added? And he has only water in his pots like Raghu Raja if a debtor does not pay."

Aniruddha bowed to his feet and said, "I'll pay the money back in a year. All of it. I promise you with my hand on your feet."

Chaudhury pulled his feet away. "The cracks in my feet will scratch you, Aniruddha. Don't touch them. Let go." What Chaudhury said was literally true. The soles of his feet were deeply cracked, the skin rough and black. It was the effect of either some deficiency in his diet or some disease. In the winter the cracks deepened and reddened with blood. On either side of the cracks the flesh was dry and hard and as sharp as a knife. "Since you're going to pay me back within a year," Chaudhury said soothingly, "what objection can you have to mortgaging ten bighas of land instead of six? It'll be entered correctly in the papers."

Aniruddha said nothing. He was thinking of natural calamities like drought and other whimsical acts of the gods. These were incalculable.

Chaudhury divined his thoughts. "Don't be afraid. I'm not going to let you die whether you pay me back in one year or five. I don't allow interest to lapse. I can't do that. But the real debt can be carried over. If you raise any objections, a Brahmin's gandush will follow." Chaudhury smiled.

"You'll get your interest every month," Aniruddha said.

"Right."

"I swear three times over, with my hand on your feet!"

"Then come back in a couple of days. I'll make enquiries."

"Enquiries? What enquiries?"

"Whether you've mortgaged the land to anybody else or not."

"I swear by your feet . . ."

"I'll have to hang my feet from the roof, son," Chaudhury laughed, "that'll do no good to you. You won't get any money and nobody'll go to the Record Office. I never give anybody money without making enquiries and I'm not going to give it to you."

Aniruddha did not get up. A passionate desire to regain the life he had lost, the prosperous orderly life of a householder, was consuming him. He felt like a weary and exhausted exile dreaming of a beloved face at home. He had to have the money. For four years the rent for his land had not been paid. At an annual rate of twenty-five rupees ten annas it came to one hundred and two and a half rupees. The interest, at 25 per cent came to twenty-five rupees ten annas. A total of one hundred and twenty-eight rupees and two annas. With expenses added it came to one hundred and forty or forty-five rupees. It was safe to make it a hundred and fifty rupees. Another hundred would be needed too. To buy a pair of oxen. He planned to till the land himself, with the help of a hired hand or two, like his father and grandfather, instead of giving it out to share-croppers. He had thirteen bighas of land in all. With a pair of oxen he could manage an additional five bighas of somebody else's land too, going shares. He would take a job in the town, in a factory or a mill. He would get up while it was still dark, feed the oxen, and go to the fields. From there, he would go to the town and on his way back take another look at his fields. His peasant could carry the plough. Aniruddha would be out the whole day. He would have to have a little liquor. He could not do without it. But he would drink only at home, buying a bottle and bringing it with him. Padma would measure out his drinks. That was that! From his job in the mill he would get, at a daily rate of eight annas and omitting Sundays, thirteen rupees each every month. One hundred and fifty-six rupees cash income a year. He would grow rice, pulses, sugar cane or molasses, wheat, barley, linseed and mustard. The detenu paid ten rupees a month as rent. That of course was not a permanent arrangement. In addition to all this he would open a smithy in the village again. He could work in it nights. His daily expenditure for salt and oil would be covered if he earned no more than eight pice a day from it. How long would it take him to pay off his debt? He could begin to save as soon as it was cleared. The next step would be to lend himself. He would take things on pawn. There was no loss in such a business, no periods of depression. Every rupee invested in it turned into two at the end of the year. If he could turn the soil a little deeper, another foot and a half, the crops would do better and the yield would double. He would

manure the land with cartloads of fertiliser and the silt of some pond.

"Aniruddha," said Chaudhury, "you won't get the money any sooner by sitting here. I'll make the enquiries. It's already ten o'clock. I have to go to school."

"Very well. Let's go to the Record Office today. I'll come with you to Konkona."

"Today?" Chaudhury smiled. "You are as restive as a winged steed. All right—wait here. You can come with me. I'll bathe and lunch. The enquiries can be made during the tiffin break."

The enquiries were not completed during the tiffin break. "Wait," said Chaudhury. "I won't be free until after three. The last gong goes at three."

As Head Pandit, Chaudhury gave a lecture on religion during the last hour of school. Not infrequently he left the boys to practise their own religion while he went to the Record Office. There he examined papers and old deeds to find out what had been purchased, sold, or mortgaged, by whom and when—and other information of the same kind.

Aniruddha waited. He had eaten nothing the whole day. Entering Paran's Sweet Shop he began to flatter him in the hope of being given a few batashas or some palm molasses. He got neither but he forgot his hunger and thirst entirely. Paran's widowed sister was looking after the shop. She was vivacious and gay. Her laughter made two hours, from one to three, fly by. Aniruddha became quite friendly with her.

"I've seen the papers," said Chaudhury.

"Is your enquiry finished?"

"Yes. It was finished some time ago but I didn't call you. You were having too good a time. The shastras forbid us to spoil people's pleasure." Chaudhury gave him a meaningful smile.

Aniruddha felt embarrassed.

"I'll give you the money."

"You'll give it to me?" Aniruddha leapt to his feet joyously.

"Yes. But you've had nothing to eat all day."

"Oh, well. It's only a couple of miles home. When, Sir?" Aniruddha stammered in his excitement.

"Come day after tomorrow. Better hurry. Clouds are gathering. It looks like a storm." Chaudhury left.

"Haven't you had anything to eat all day?" the girl asked.

"What does it matter? It won't be long before I'm home."

"Have a drink of water and some batashas," she said. "Why didn't you tell me? Come on. Eat something before you go."

Aniruddha was refreshed by the sweet batashas and the water. He picked up his axe and went out into the road. He turned to-

wards home and set out at a brisk pace. The storm broke as he reached the outskirts of the village. There had been no rain for a long time and the country was dry. The storm was a violent summer storm, a Black Baishakhi. Such storms usually occurred in the month of Baishakh. It was now only the middle of Chaitra. Blackness enveloped the landscape. Dust rose with the wildness of the driving wind, swirling up into the sky. Clouds piled upon clouds, their shadows spinning in whirlwinds. The gloom was eerie, a strange murky yellow. The storm roared.

Aniruddha took shelter under a tree. Hail and lightning might follow. What could he do? Could anybody run back to the village through this? Death only comes once.

The storm soughed and raged. Broken branches hurtled through the sky. Thatch was flying. A corrugated iron roof soared through the air with a fearful sound. The rain was not long in coming. It swathed everything in a shroud of water within seconds. The dry thirsty soil drank it noisily. The fragrance of wet earth rose on the cool stormy wind. It was a relief from the long dry spell but such a storm before the month of Baishakh was unseasonable. The saying runs:

A gusty Chaitra,
Storms in Baishakh.
Cracked earth in Jaistha.
And a good monsoon follows.

Luckily there was no hail. One good effect of the rain was that it softened the ground and it was now possible to plough. A single turn of the soil at this time of the year does the work of five carts of fertiliser. The stubble, turned under, rots underground, producing a loam light and friable, spreading in the land like a beloved woman.

It was evening before the storm abated. The night was overcast and dark. The path across the fields was muddy and there were potholes full of water. Drifts of straw, leaves and broken branches washed up by the rain, were piled here and there.

Refuse of all kinds was scattered about. Frogs, excited by the rain, croaked loudly and continuously. An occasional slithering sound proclaimed the presence of a serpent, rustling by with its long body. Aniruddha was undeterred. He sang loudly as he walked, clutching his axe. A snake! Didn't snakes want to live? His loud singing warned them to stay out of his way. He was not singing wholly for his own pleasure. If any snake was so rash as to lift its head against him, spread its hood and hiss even after being warned, Aniruddha's axe was ready. A snake! Aniruddha laughed. When he had converted his two

plots of land into one by destroying the ridge that separated them he had killed twelve king cobras he had discovered in an old ditch. Five of them were over four feet long. Aniruddha was not afraid of serpents or of beasts.

The storm had devastated the village.

Leaves, straw and broken branches blocked the roads. Trees had lost their foliage. The large branch of the bokul tree at Shasti Tola had been ripped away. Most of the houses had lost their thatched roofs. The roof of Harendra Ghosal's tower-like room, as high as a medium-sized palm tree, had been carried away and dropped in Harish Mandal's pond. The houses of the Bayens and Bauris had suffered the greatest damage. Their houses were covered with palm fronds and, at best, by a thin layer of thatching. The storm left them completely exposed. The floors were muddy. Rain had softened and partly dissolved the clay walls.

Debu Bhai had escaped. Such a good man. Debu Bhai! Aha! Doctor Jaggan had escaped too. Half of the verandah roof of his dispensary had been blown away. That was not much. Oddly enough, Srihari had escaped as well; the corrugated iron roof of his house was secured with iron chains. Ranga Didi was shouting shrill execrations as she set about sweeping out her house in the darkness.

Aniruddha reached home.

Jatin was sitting on the porch, reading "Who is it?" he asked.

"Me, Aniruddha"

"Where were you all day?"

"I was away. Working." Aniruddha looked at the roof of his house, staring up keenly at it in the dark. Jatin was somewhat surprised. Aniruddha was speaking soberly. For him it was almost abnormal. "Are you all right?" Jatin asked. "What are you looking at?"

"At the thatch. No, it hasn't blown away." On the west side of the roof of the living room the thatch was standing on end like porcupine quills. That was all.

Aniruddha went into the house. "I'll be back in a minute, Babu," he said. "I've a lot to tell you"

He had to eat something. He was famished.

Padma had already cleared the courtyard, the steps and the path to the pond. Who was that sitting beside her? A boy? Who was he? Oh! The son of that bounder, Tarini, who begged at the station. How did he get here? "Where has he come from?" Aniruddha asked, going up to Padma.

Padma was surprised to see Aniruddha. He spoke to the boy. "Where have you come from?"

"The detenu Babu brought him home with him today. He is the Babu's servant."

"Huh! of all the corpses that collect at a landing place! Give me something to eat, will you?"

Padma rose at once. "The boy stole something at the station," she explained. "People were beating him. The detenu Babu set him free and brought him home."

Aniruddha was annoyed. The fellow might steal something belonging to him or to the detenu some day and run away with it. "Heh, you!" he cried. "What did you steal? From whom?"

The boy did not answer. He stared at Aniruddha sideways, inclining his head, with the look of a frightened and furious animal.

"What kind of a person are you?" Padma intervened. "Somebody else brought him here. He didn't come of his own accord. Why are you scolding him? He is only a child—an orphan—how is he at fault? Go, boy, go to your master."

The boy did not move. He stayed where he was, in the same position.

Chapter 21

ALL activity in the village revolves around the two halves into which its life is divided, the field and the home. During the three months from Ashar to Bhadra the days are spent in the fields, ploughing, planting, transplanting. The four months which follow, from Aswin to Paush, are given to reaping, bringing the harvest home, threshing, winnowing, husking. Grain is measured, weighed and stored away in bins. Winter crops are started. The villagers spend nearly three-fourths of their time in the fields. From Magh to Chaitra their activity is confined to the house. Accounts are drawn up, debts paid. Preparations are made for the new sowing that will start when the rains come. The house is tidied up, inside and out. New rooms are added as required, old ones repaired. Thatched roofs are changed. Manure is turned in the pits and watered down. Ropes are twisted from

jute fibre. Singing parties and meetings are held, stories told. Smoking is a constant preoccupation. The tobacco is cut, mixed with molasses, put in a pot and buried under shallow water to mellow. In farmers' families this is the time of year when marriages take place. They prefer the months of Magh and Falgun, even Baishakh. The Harijans can marry in Chaitra. Their weddings usually take place between Paush and Chaitra.

The peaceful rhythm of this regulated life is disrupted by unseasonable events like the summer storm. The villagers left their rope-making and hurried to the fields early in the morning. Elders took their tobacco pipes with them, while younger men carried matches and cigarettes in their pockets or waist bands. Half-smoked cigarettes were stuck behind their ears. They walked up and down the ridges between fields. Three or four had already started to plough high land. In low-lying fields water was still standing. So ploughing could not start until it had dried out a little. The crops in the riverbed which had been wilting like babes deprived of their mother's milk were so refreshed by the rain, they began to grow like Mahiravana's son who passed through ten different stages of growth in as many days. Some damage had been done to the sesamum which was just beginning to flower, although it benefitted from the rain on the whole. The blossoms out of which the rain had washed the honey would not bear fruit. Sugar cane could be planted now. The storm had done a great deal of good even if some houses had been blown about. How could that be helped?

The women, the ends of their saris tucked tightly in at the waist, were busy tidying up and were collecting leaves and sticks and sweeping them into heaps. These would go into the manure pits. The children had run into the mango orchards as soon as it was light and were scrambling for the fruit that was strewn on the ground. Harijan women took home huge bundles of firewood which they had collected. Then they set about cleaning their homes and courtyards. The men had gone out to work early. Some had steady jobs in the houses of the more prosperous farmers, others worked in the mills at the junction; a number worked as day labourers in other villages.

Durga was sitting at home. She never went out with a basket like the other women. Her work was of a different kind. She purchased firewood. She had milked the cow and taken the milk to the detenu. She had given some milk to Bilu on the way, drinking a cup of tea with her before she came home. She used to have an early cup of tea at Aniladdha's—she and Padma drank what was left after the detenu had his. But she had kept

away since Padma had so harshly ordered her out of the house. She gave the detenu his milk on the porch and did little chores for him but she did not go in. He had not spoken to her for several days and she was thinking about the situation. She decided to send her mother with the milk instead of going herself.

Durga's mother was sweeping the courtyard. Patu's wife had gone out with a basket. Patu was sitting on the porch with his baby son. People said the baby looked like Haren Ghosal but Patu was very fond of him. Patu had changed greatly during the past year. Both his circumstances and his disposition were strangely altered. Patu Bayen had been quite an authoritative individual. He had walked and talked with a certain dignity. People were envious of him. His income from the charnel field had been good. He sold skins and leather and made drum heads from skins he scraped and tanned himself. His drums had a sweet ringing tone, like that of a metal gong. But only a fourth of his earnings had come from his land and his drumming; three-fourths had come from the charnel field. The charnel field had been taken out of his hands and leased out for money by the zemindar. Ramand Chatterjee of Konkona had given it to Rahamat Shekh of Alepur. Patu had lost his land as well, which had been incorporated in the zemindar's holdings. Patu had let it go. How could he manage with only three bighas of land and drumming? He could do no other work on the days he played the drum. He began to drum for cash payment only and went wherever he was called. That was more profitable. When he had an engagement, Patu put on clean clothes, threw a shawl over his shoulder, hung his drum on his back and set out. He brought back two or three rupees and was often given old clothes as well. But he was, nevertheless, unemployed for the greater part of the year. He could not work as a day labourer. How could he? He had status as a good drummer.

Patu was thinking about the charnel field. Nilu Bayen, a man belonging to his caste, had earned lakhs of rupees from the sale of leather and skins. He was known now as Nilu Das and was a big merchant, living in Calcutta. A magistrate—M.A., B.L.—had resigned his government post to become his manager. Das's residence was large and spacious. The shrine attached to it was large too. He had a motor car. In his own village Nilu Das had opened a school and built a hospital. Just like the Konkona gentlemen. His son was, Patu had heard, a member of the Governor's Council. Patu dreamed of leasing the charnel field himself and growing rich like Nilu Das!

The family was kept going by his wife and Durga. They paid the daily expenses. There had been a time when Patu had denounced Durga cruelly, shaming her in public, for her intimacy with Chiru Pal, but now he fondled a child that looked like Haren Ghosal and loved him like his own son. Now and then he went to Ghosal and asked for money, saying, "I've got to have four annas today, Ghosal Mashay!"

At night Durga went either to the town or to Konkona. The person who waited for her would ask, "Who is that with you?" The indistinct figure in the darkness would move aside. Durga would say, "That is my brother. He came with me."

"Who?"

"My brother."

The indistinct figure bowed in greeting.

"Give him a cigarette," Durga would say, "let him smoke while he waits."

Patu was recognisable by the glow of the cigarette, where he sat in a corner of the verandah of the Konkona gentlemen's garden or beneath a tree. At the time of coming away he received four annas or eight annas for his trouble. Durga got it for him.

Over and over again Patu urged Durga, "It's only twenty-five rupees. No more than that! Give it to me, Durga. I'll take the charnel field on lease."

"We'll talk about that later," Durga would answer. This time she added, "Go and fetch some palm fronds now. The house must be covered."

Disasters of this kind were not uncommon. The Bayens were used to them. When there was a fire, of course, they had to have bamboos and wood in order to rebuild their homes. When there was only a storm all that was needed was palm fronds. The men gathered them from the palms on the levee or beside khash ponds and thatched their roofs with them. The women brought the fronds home on their heads. The men usually went to cut fronds either before or after their work. Two or three of the women could also climb trees and cut fronds. Durga had done it at one time but she did not do it nowadays. Nor was it necessary. The thatch on her house was thick and heavy, tied down securely. None of it had blown away although it was dishevelled. Two hired hands could smooth it down in a day. Patu himself could do it. She would pay him wages for two days.

"Huh!" said Patu.

"Huh? Get up!"

"Let my wife come."

"I'll send her after you as soon as she comes in. And Mother too. Please go."

"Mother won't go," Durga's mother said. She went on with her sweeping. "I have to work for you because you feed me. But why should I work for that rascal? For what? He never calls me Mother. He never gives me a pice or a rag to wear. Why should I work for him?"

"Which of your fathers feeds you?"

"Do you hear him, Durga? Do you hear what he is saying?"

"Stop! Stop! You two," Durga interrupted them. "It doesn't do any good for you to shout. Or to go. Let my sister-in-law come. I'll go with her. Go on ahead, brother."

Patu stuck his bill hook into his waist and set out for the river bank. He selected a palm with large round fronds and climbed it.

Rakhohari Bauri was cutting fronds on a tree close to his. Who was in the tree on the other side? It was a woman, Rakhohari's wife, Pari. Who was over there? "Who's there?" Patu shouted, unable to see.

"It's me, Gona." It was Gonapati.

"And who else?"

"Banka is next to me and Chidam over there. That's Motilal."

They talked as they worked, sitting in the trees. "Ne—ee! Hu—ee! Hoosh-da! Hoosh-da! Bap re! I'm being killed! Hish! What beaks! How sharp they are! Baba!" Rakhohari stuttered. His speech was defective.

Two crows had attacked him. They flew over his head, cawing loudly and diving at him with their beaks. Their nest was in the tree. "I told you not to go up that tree," his wife, Pari, scolded, "I told you there was a nest of crows in it! How do you like it now, you noisy bamboo-rattler?" She laughed aloud at Rakhohari's discomfiture.

There was a heavy thud a short distance away. Who had fallen? How dreadful! He had dropped like a ripe palm fruit in Bhadra. Had he spilt open? No. He was moving. He wasn't dead. There. He was sitting up. A strong fellow! The ground was moist and soft. That was what had saved him. But who was he? "Who are you?"

"Snake!" he cried as he struggled to his feet.

"Snake?"

"Krait! I jumped when it hissed as I was about to move up to the frond on that side."

Foring Bauri! He was strong and young. It was a close one, that. The snake had gone up the tree in search of birds' eggs.

Patu was in trouble too. Ants poured out in a stream when he cut one of the fronds. They swarmed over his body. He undid the small towel tied around his waist and brushed them off as best he could. "Off, rascals, off! Dhe-y-t! Dhe-y-t!"

Durga was scraping her teeth clean as she sat in front of her mirror. She was fastidiously clean in her person and her habits. Her teeth had to be always as white as conch shells. The red stain of betel juice did not always come off with a brush. She had to scrape it away. As soon as her sister-in-law came in she would have to fetch fronds with her and her clothes would get dirty. Dust would get into her hair and she would have to change. It was a bother but what could she do? Patu was her brother.

"Your sister-in-law is earning good money," her mother was saying. "Does she ever give me a pice? Does she show me the respect due to a mother-in-law?"

"Why talk about it, Mother? Drop it." Durga laughed. "Do you need to touch that money?"

Her mother rasped, "Oh, my, how virtuous is my daughter! What a Savitri!"

Somebody was approaching, swearing as she came. "Stop it, Mother," Durga said. "Stop it! Don't make a scene. Somebody's coming."

"Won't there be trouble? Of course there'll be!" Ranga Didi was crying at the top of her voice.

"What's the matter, Ranga Didi?" Durga asked.

"That rascal Govinda! He dares to say no after all those years!"

"What?"

"What? Have you just come back from foreign parts? The neighbours know. The villagers know. And you don't know? Who are you, girl? I can't see very well and the light of the blackfaced sun is blinding! I don't recognise you. Who are you?"

"I'm Durga."

"Durga! You do look after yourself, don't you? Why you never think of anyone else? Don't you know that Govinda's father borrowed two rupees from me? He paid me two annas a month as interest and came whenever I sent for him. He helped me around the house. After he died, Govinda paid me regularly for ten or twelve years, and came when I sent for him, working for me as his father did. Today I sent for him again and he says he won't come, he won't work for me free any more, he won't pay any more interest, he won't pay the debt either! He says he has paid me more than my due. I'm on my way to Debu. Times are bad! Times are bad! What will happen to me if others act like Govinda!"

The old woman had a number of such debtors, ten or twelve at least. More than forty rupees were out on loan. Her debtors paid her interest regularly, generation after generation. She never

tried to recover the original debt and nobody ever offered to pay it. They calculated that when she died they would get out of their obligations.

The old woman went on her way, talking continuously. A little further down the road she inadvertently stepped into a mud hole. Immediately she started cursing the clouds, the Union Board tax collector, and some boys playing in the mud. She cursed fourteen generations of their ancestors! As she passed Doctor Jaggan's dispensary she covered her nose against the smell of medicine, cursed all medicine, cursed the doctor, cursed sickness and cursed the sick! The prospect of losing money had thoroughly roused her.

"Oh, Pandit," she called as she reached Debu's house.

There was no answer. The old woman went in, scolding as she went. "Have you gone deaf or something, you two? Oh, Debu!"

A smile appeared in the corner of Bilu's lips. She did not answer. She understood Ranga Didi was angry.

"Where is that Debu fellow? Debu?"

"He's not at home, Ranga Didi."

"Speak louder! Where has he gone to?"

"He's not at home. He's gone to the temple pavilion."

"The temple pavilion?"

"Yes."

"All right. That's where I'm going! Let me see if there's any justice left! Good. Debu will be there. So will Chiru. Let them drag that pig-eater to the pavilion by the ears! How impudent he is! No justice! No religion!"

The old woman scolded all the way to the pavilion.

The pavilion was crowded. A large meeting was in progress.

Bhupal was there, cane in hand. Patu, Rakhohari, Peri, Banka, Chidam, Foring, and a few others were sitting at the Shasti Tola, with their heads in their hands. Beside them, on the ground, were several bundles of palm fronds. The embankment beside the Mayurakshi River was the property of the zemindar. The palm trees on it were also his property. Bhupal had arrested the persons who were cutting fronds. Srihari's face was solemn as he puffed at his water pipe. Patu and his friends had sent for Debu. He was sitting quietly on one side. Haren Ghosal, who was the secretary of the Praja Samity, had come of his own accord. He was talking loudly.

"They've always cut fronds from those trees. Their fathers and grandfathers cut them! They've cut fronds for generations. They have a right to do it."

Srihari did not answer him.

"It's nothing new, Mashay. We've always done it." Patu said a little hotly. He had nourished a secret antipathy to Srihari for years.

"Because you've been doing something wrong for a long time does not give you the right to keep on doing it, does it? If you cut fronds, you're stealing."

"It can't be called stealing, Srihari," Debu spoke at last, "no one ever raised any objection before. They cut fronds. Objections have been raised. They won't cut them any more. If they cut them again without permission you may, if you like, call it stealing."

"No, never," Ghosal declared. "You're wrong, Debu. They have a right to cut fronds from those trees. They're been doing it for three generations. Can a road or a landing place at a river be closed to the public after it has been in use three years? It cannot."

"This is a question of trees, Ghosal," Srihari laughed, "not of a road or a landing place."

"Yes, a tree is a tree and a road is a road. But man is man after all!"

"What becomes of their right to cut fronds if the zemindar decides to sell the trees or cut them down? Don't talk nonsense. All trees on khash and mal lands belong to the zemindar. The tenantry may enjoy the fruit of such trees but they cannot cut them down."

Debu sighed. A long forgotten memory stirred painfully in his breast. There had been a jackfruit tree beside the back door of their house which bore abundantly. He remembered it indistinctly. The fruit did not ripen but was delicious cooked unripe as a vegetable. The zemindar cut it down in order to make furniture from the wood. He had paid a nominal price for it but when Debu's father objected he cut it anyway, invoking the law. His father had spoken regretfully of the tree for a long time. "How tasty the green fruit was!" he would say. "As good as goat's meat!"

"Why don't you do that, Srihari? Cut all the trees down. Nobody will benefit from them," said Debu.

"Uncle Debu, you're losing your temper for nothing. I only clarified the legal position. Why should the zemindar cut the trees down? But he can't be blamed for taking the help of the law if the tenants go against him, can he? He won't be doing anything illegal or unfair if he does, will he?"

"In what way have these poor people gone against the zemindar? What does their sudden arrest mean?"

"Ask them. Ask the secretary of the Praja Samity." Srihari

looked towards the Harijans and asked, "Well, what about it? Do you still want pay for thatching the temple pavilion?"

So that was it! The matter was at last clear. Everyone fell silent. But their hearts were burning! Debu's heart was burning more hotly than anyone else's. It was not the disparity between the price of the fronds and the cost of thatching the pavilion that perturbed him. It was Srihari's attitude throughout the proceedings.

Ranga Didi had come up some time before. The whole affair dumbfounded her. She was short of hearing. It took her a little time to grasp what it was all about. "Yes, you dacoits, why don't you thatch the pavilion? Insolence, that's what it is! Dear me! Where am I to go?"

"Why do you talk about something you don't understand, Ranga Didi?" Haren Ghosal took the opportunity to scold her. "To whom does the temple pavilion belong? What does it matter to the Harijans whether there is a temple pavilion or not? And what right do the people of the village have to it? The pavilion belongs to the zemindar. It has nothing to do with the temple any more. It's the zemindar's office."

"What belongs to the Raja belongs also to the tenants! If the pavilion belongs to the zemindar it belongs to the people of the village too!"

Debu laughed aloud. "That applies to the fronds as well, Ranga Didi. Do you see the fronds?"

"Who's that? Debu?"

"Yes."

"Fronds? Yes, of course. They're nothing more than fronds, are they, Srihari? Where will they get fronds if they don't take the Raja's?"

"Off with you! Off with you! Go home! Nobody has asked your opinion! Go home!" Srihari addressed her with the greatest harshness.

Ranga Didi lost her courage. She had never been afraid of anybody in the village but for some time past she had begun to realise that Srihari was a man to be feared. The old woman tottered away. "Debu, come home," she called as she left, "your son is crying." She lied to get him away. Debu was sure to get involved in some trouble. What a boy he was! She was growing fonder of him every day.

Debu did not obey her. He turned to Srihari. "Good. What do you want to do now?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean if you want to send these people to jail on a theft charge, do it. And if you want them to pay the price of the fronds, take the money. It takes twenty fronds to make a mat.

A mat costs two pice. They'll pay at that rate."

Srihari turned to the Harijans. "Do you still want to quarrel? What about it, eh?"

"Sir?"

"Count the fronds," said Debu, "how many have each of you cut?"

They started counting.

Srihari flared up instantly. "Stop!" he cried. "Don't touch those fronds! Sit down!"

The intensity of his sudden fury startled everybody. The Harijans dropped the fronds and stood aside. Only Patu remained where he was, although he let go of the fronds. Bhabesh and Harish were sitting beside Srihari. They jumped. Haren Ghosal almost choked. He took a few steps to one side and glared at Srihari with popping eyes. Debu was startled but he controlled himself and rose to his feet. He went up to the Harijans and spoke with great firmness. "Leave the fronds where they are. Come away. I'm telling you to get up and come away!"

They looked up into his face. His worn features were glowing with a strange spirit. It seemed to reassure them. They rose and turned to leave the pavilion.

"Bhupal," shouted Srihari, "stop them."

Debu looked at him and smiled slightly. "Go," he said to the men, "nobody is going to touch you before settling with me. Go back where you came from."

"Come on," cried Haren Ghosal, coming forward to lead the way swiftly. He went down into the road.

Debu was the last to leave the pavilion.

Srihari's yellow eyes were as fierce, cunning and cruel as Saturn's.

"Hari, Hari, Bol!" cried some one from the road in exultant sarcasm. It was followed by a burst of wild laughter.

It was Aniruddha. He was dancing about, clapping his hands and laughing loudly. The insult to Srihari had overjoyed him.

Srihari was silent for a long time. Then he gave an angry sigh. Harish, Bhabesh and the others who were indebted to Srihari were astounded at what had taken place.

"You can't blame me after this, can you?" Srihari said at last.

"We saw it all with our own eyes, didn't we? How can we blame you?" asked Harish.

"Bhupal!" Srihari called.

"Yes, sir."

"This work is too much for you, son."

"Sir?" Bhupal began to scratch his head.

"What could Bhupal do in the presence of so many?" Bhabesh said. "How can you blame the poor fellow?"

"I—I'm only the village watchman, sir," stammered Bhupal, "how can I deal with criminal cases? You're a member of the Union Board. Can you tell me what I could have done?"

"Go to Konkona," said Srihari. "Go to the Banerjee's old orderly, Nader Shekh. Tell him to send his son, Kalu Shekh, to me. Tell him that I'm engaging his services."

"Kalu Shekh?" Bhabesh asked in surprise and alarm.

"Yes, Kalu Shekh."

Nader Shekh had at one time been a famous wielder of the lathi. Kalu was a worthy son. Strongly built, young, cunning, daring and rash, he had already done some time in jail for rioting and he had been sent up as a suspect in a dacoity case but released for want of evidence. Kalu Shekh was greatly feared.

"I won't do anything wrong, Uncle Harish. I don't wish to harm anybody. But I'll finish anyone who puts his foot on my head, no matter how wrong it may be," Srihari said. "Those low-born rascals!" he went on after a brief silence, "I give them rice during the rainy season. They'd starve if I didn't. And they defied me today, did they? They got up and left? That Debu Ghosh! I took great care to see that his land was correctly entered in the Settlement Record. Twice a day I enquired after his family while he was in prison. Do you know, Uncle Harish, I even tried to get his job in the school back for him. I spoke to the president of the Board about it."

"Don't do good to anybody during the Age of Kali!" Bhabesh commented. "It's not appreciated."

"That detenu is at the root of it all. It's he who is instigating the others. He's having a fine time with the blacksmith's wife. And that rogue of a blacksmith—" Srihari turned cruel and hard. "Ungrateful village! Sometimes I think I won't do anything for it any more."

"God has made you great," protested Bhabesh, "how can you say things like that? It's not becoming to a man of your position and wealth. Of course, you must go on doing good to others. It's your dharma!"

Srihari said nothing for a while. When he spoke his words came easily and naturally. "Uncle Harish, please tell Shasti to begin his work from today. The bricks are out of the kiln. The floor of the school can wait. Ten days won't make any difference. Let it get good and wet, then it won't crack. But the bridge must be built now. That is not my project even though I've contributed ten rupees. I gave the money to the Union Board for the purpose of building the bridge. How can I explain any delay?"

Shasti was Harish's son. He had become a building contractor with Srihari's help. The Union Board was building a bridge on the Sivkalipur road. Srihari was paying for the floor of the school himself. Shasti Charan had undertaken both jobs.

"Shasti sits down with your papers in the morning," said Harish, "and keeps at them until evening. He's busy with your work. There's a lot of accounting to do."

Shasti Charan also kept the gomasta's records. The accounts of defaulters were being examined. Those with arrears of four years would be prosecuted in the courts. He kept Srihari's personal grain accounts up-to-date as well. Revenue had to be paid every three years.

Bhupal had left. There was no one to change the tobacco in the water pipe. Bhabesh sat down to do it himself. A wood fire was burning at Shasti Tola. He squatted down beside it and began to puff the fire into the pipe. Suddenly he called out, "Who's that? A boy?"

A boy was passing with a bunch of red flowers in his hand. He stopped when he was called.

"Who are you? What are the flowers you are carrying? Are they asoka?"

The boy was Nolin Bairagi. He had been to the Patuas of Mahagram. Asoka flowers were blossoming in the Thakur's garden, and he had plucked enough to make a bouquet for the detenu. He brought flowers for Debu Ghosh also and for one or two of his neighbours. In two days' time the festival of the Asoka Shasti was due to take place.

"Yes, asoka flowers," Nolin nodded.

"Give me some then. A small branch will do."

Nolin put several flowers down before him and went on his way.

"I've planted asoka saplings on the banks of my new pond," said Srihari.

He was making a new garden around the pond he had excavated recently and planting choice sapling in it

Chapter 22

No sorrow afflicts those who observe the Asoka Shasti. "What is lost is found; those who die, revive," runs the saying. Women fast from morning. After the prescribed rites they listen to the brata stories, eat eight asoka buds and anoint the brows of their sons with curd mixed with turmeric paste. Then they have the first meal of the day. It is a light meal.

On the sixth day of each Bengali month, twelve times a year, the goddess Shasti descends to earth for the good of mankind. She is worshipped with rites appropriate to the various aspects of the months. In Baishakh she is the Shasti of Sandalwood, in Jaistha the Shasti of the Forest, in Ashar the Shasti of the Bamboos, in Sravana the Shasti of Plunder, in Bhadra the Shasti of the Clouds, in Aswin Shasti is the mother goddess, Durga, in Karttik she is the Shasti of Time, in Agrahayan the Shasti of Wholeness, in Paush the Shasti of Roots, in Magh the Shasti of Small-pox, Sitala, in Falgun the Gavinda Shasti and in Chaitra the Asoka Shasti. When the asoka tree fills with flowers in the spring she comes to make men forget their sorrows. The goddess is clothed in saffron and wears conch shell bracelets. A red line shines in the parting of her hair and her seven sons stand at her back. She is seated and in her lap are seven boys who are the sons of others. Shasti is worshipped a thirteenth time, the day before the Gajon. This ceremony is the only one which does not fall on the sixth day of a month.

Padma had been busy from early morning trying to get the housework done so that she could bathe. Then she would go to Bilu's house to listen to the reading of the stories. Aniruddha was adding greatly to her work. He had chosen this, of all days, to put his smithy in order. The anvil, the forge, the bellows, tongs, hammers and mallets were being cleaned and rearranged.

Coal dust and cobwebs had accumulated and they could not be cleared in a minute or two. The smithy had not been used for a long time. Bits of iron, thin and sharp as the curled wooden parings from a carpenter's plane which clung to flesh like hooks were mixed with the coal. The smithy floor had to be plastered with cowdung after it had been swept out. Tarini's son was helping Padma. Jatin gave the boy food and in return he did a few small chores for him, but he spent most of his time with Padma. When Aniruddha scolded he said nothing. Trouble started when he left the house, for he never came straight home after delivering a message to Debu for Jatin. Debu would come, discuss the matter in hand and go away. Still there would be no sign of the child. He would turn up much later, at meal time. Often he had to be sought out and brought home. Padma would look for him in the jungle or the Harijan neighbourhood.

Aniruddha had been given the money he wanted by Kabuli Chaudhury in return for a mortgage on his entire property. He had felt diffident about that but when the money was placed in his hands he forgot his misgivings and set to work with a will. His arrears of rent were paid up in full in court. He did not trust compromise agreements. And why should he seek a compromise? He decided to buy a pair of oxen at the Pachundi cattle market. He had already engaged Patu to help him. He was fond of Patu who had pleaded a lot on his behalf with Durga. He was helping Aniruddha now in the smithy and together they carried heavy pieces of iron out. As they worked they discussed arrangements for tilling the land and the problem of how to buy oxen.

Patu was in favour of buying Durga's young ox. Another to match it could be bought from the market. That, he thought, would be the best possible arrangement.

"Durga's asking a high price," Aniruddha smiled.

"The dealers have offered her a hundred. Durga's holding out. She wants twenty-five more. She'll let you have it for less since I am in this with you. . . ."

"A hundred rupees is all I have," said Aniruddha. "Drop the idea, Patu. I'll buy two small young animals. They'll do for my land. I don't have all that much."

"Buy a white-faced one! White-faced cows are lucky."

"Come with me. Let's go to the cattle market together."

"What have you started now, boy? Are you picking up bits of iron again? Is that what you call work?"

The boy did not answer.

"Aya-e! Aya-ee! What a rascal! Here you! Boy!" cried Patu.

The boy bared his teeth and imitated him impishly.

"Oh, he's making fun of me! A fine fellow, eh?"

"Bring him here. Catch him by the ears, Patu, and drag him here."

"He'll bite you," Padma intervened quickly. "Don't touch him. He'll bite you if you do."

Biting was one of the boy's bad habits. His teeth were sharp as razors. He bit down hard on the hand of any one who touched him. The suddenness of his attack took people by surprise. They let go. He fled at top speed. This was his way of defending himself. Today, however, he ran off before Patu could lift a hand.

"Uchingel! Uchingel!" Padma called after him anxiously. "Oh, re, ah! Uchingel. Don't go anywhere. Do you hear me?"

Uchingel was the boy's nickname. His parents had given him another, proper name but he did not know what it was himself nor did anyone else. Only his parents knew! 'Uchingel' means 'grasshopper.' Uchingel paid no attention to Padma. It was into the house that he ran, however. That was encouraging. Padma followed him.

"Where are you going?" asked Aniruddha.

"I'm going to see where the boy is."

"What's it to you? Let him go! Get on with your own work!"

"Today is the sixth of the month. Be careful what you say!" Padma turned her large, accusing eyes on Aniruddha, reproving him silently. Then she went in.

Aniruddha glared angrily after her, grinding his teeth. Padma did not give him a backward glance. Aniruddha sighed and began to work again. She was a woman who was a mother without giving birth! A botheration to him!

Uchingel had not left the house. He was sitting with Jatin. Padma could hear Jatin saying, "Where is Ma Moni?"

"Uh-ee. In the smithy."

Padma smiled. He was asking for her. There now. What did he need his Ma Moni for this time? What a spoiled boy Jatin was! A boy who asked for the moon! She rattled the chain to let him know she was at the inner door. Debu, Jaggan, Haren, Girish, Godai and many others were on Jatin's porch, where a meeting was in progress. Jatin smiled when he heard the chain rattle and rose and entered the house. Padma looked with concern at her clothes and hands. They were black with coal dust and cobwebs. "No, no," she cried, "don't come in."

"I'm not to come in?"

"No, I look like a ghost."

"Ghost?" Jatin laughed.

"Yes. See my hands," Padma held her blackened hands out for his inspection from behind the door. "I'm a witch. Don't come now. The sight of me will frighten you." Padma was amused. She laughed aloud at herself.

"But Ma Moni," Jatin laughed with her, "we want tea. Right now. Wash your hands and put the kettle on."

Padma began to grumble. "Tea! How many times a day do people drink tea?" It was her fate! Aniruddha was a drunkard. Jatin was a tea addict. And Uching had teeth!

Jatin went back to his guests. Tea was one of the chief attractions of the gatherings at his house. Haren had asked for it several times already. "Tea. Where's the tea? The meeting can't get going without tea."

Jaggan was delivering a discourse on the political history of Bengal. The possibility of amending the laws governing tenants' rights was his subject at the moment. Hotly debated currently in the Legislative Assembly, the question had been raised locally by Srihari's statement. Pal had said tenants enjoy the right only to the fruit of trees planted on mal land. The trees themselves were the property of the zemindar.

"The law is being amended to clarify and secure the rights of the tenants," Jaggan was saying. "The poison fangs of the zemindar will be plucked out. The way the law is being altered was fully described in the papers the other day. I've made a clipping and put it carefully away. The amendment is sure to be passed! Oh! What speeches the Swaraj Party is making! Fire and brimstone!"

"What will the new arrangement be, Doctor?"

Haren read only newspaper headlines and law court notices. "There'll be lots of changes!" he cried. "Lots! It's complicated. It'll make a good thick book. Bah! How can it be explained in a word or two? What are the new arrangements, Doctor? Is it so easy to understand them?"

Jaggan did not remember all that had appeared in the papers nor had he understood it. He said a great many things. The first thing was:

"The tenants' right to trees will be recognised."

The zemindar's right to deprive the tenant of a tree would be abrogated. Fees for entering names in rent records or changing them would be fixed and the tenant would pay the fee directly to the Registry Office.

The tenant would be able to build permanent structures on mal land.

The land would become, in fact, the tenant's.

"Sub-tenants will be given proprietary rights? And temporary share-croppers?"

"Yes, yes," cried Jaggan. "Put some oil in your nose and go to sleep! What will be left to do when sub-tenants have proprietary rights? All the land you farm for a share of the crop will become yours."

Debu was sitting in silence as was his custom. For the last few days he had been feeling very distressed. He was worried about Patu and the other Harijans.

They had defied Srihari at his suggestion and Srihari was sure to take his revenge in one way or another within a few days. They had to be protected and it was up to Debu to do it. He was responsible. It was his duty but—he sighed deeply. Where was the time to worry about Bilu, the baby, his lands or his home? He thought of them only now and then, for a short time. Other things claimed his attention.

"If Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das were alive today—" Jaggan was speaking. The great name thrilled every listener. They all knew who Chittaranjan, the friend of the country, was. They had seen his photograph.

The strong face floated before Debu's eyes. There was a framed photograph on the wall of his room. Beneath it the poet Rabindranath had written:

You brought with you a deathless spirit—
That you, in dying, bequeathed to the land.

Jatin called from inside the house. "Uchingel!"

Uchinge had not found any outlet for his restlessness in the meeting. For some time he had watched a chameleon hunting in the brush across the road. Its still, alert stalking quietened the poor boy and he fell asleep.

"E—ii! Boy! E—ii!" Haren scolded.

"Don't call him," Debu protested. "Don't you see he's asleep? He's only a child." He got up and went into the house himself, saying to Jatin, "Tell me what has to be done, will you?"

"Pass the bowls of tea," Jatin answered.

Debu served the tea. As he sipped the hot liquid, Jaggan resumed his discourse, speaking of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Jatindra Mohan and Subhas Chandra.

The meeting broke up. Debu was the last to leave although he had been the first to stand up. "There is something I would like to discuss with you, Debu Babu," Jatin said.

Debu sat down again.

"Don't hesitate any longer, Debu Babu," Jatin said when the others had gone away, "take up the work of the Samity."

The Samity! The Praja Samity! Jatin was asking Debu to take charge of it.

Debu was silent.

"Without you nothing can be done! Nothing! Everyone wants you. The doctor may be a little disappointed. Let him be. Something is taking shape—growing—it won't be right to let it go to pieces."

"I'll tell you tomorrow," Debu said.

"There's nothing to tell me," Jatin insisted. "You've got to accept."

Jatin sat on after Debu left, thinking. He had read about the plight of Bengal's villages when he was a student. He knew the official statistics and had read articles in numerous journals. He had not, however, been able to visualise the true state of affairs. It was only the month of Chaitra. Not all the crops had been brought in from the fields yet. But bins were already empty. The grain had been swallowed up by Srihari's store-houses and the mills in the town. Wheat, barley, potatoes, and pulses had all been sold. Sesame was still in the fields, but dealers had staked out their claims to the crop, giving advances. A meeting had taken place in Srihari's office. He had begun issuing loans of grain. The broad fields attached to the village were mortgaged to moneylenders almost entirely, mostly to Srihari. Every house in the village was in need of repair; the homesteads were dilapidated. The livestock was weak, the people dull and stupid. A thick undergrowth of jungle was springing up everywhere. Ruts and potholes made the roads dangerous. And the storm had turned them into a quagmire. The state of the water in the ponds used for bathing and drinking made one shudder. Even the largest ponds were silted up until there was only a few feet of water left in the lowest parts. Jatin had seen a fisherman building low mud ridges to trap fish. The water had not come to the man's waist.

It was amazing that people lived in such conditions!

To a healthy man such a life seemed ghastly. It was like the life of a consumptive counting his days. Passively, in complete capitulation, the village was drifting step by step towards extinction. There was no resistance.

How could a Praja Samity exist in such a place? The rains were two dry, hard, hot months away. The villagers had no resources. The ploughing and planting season would start when the monsoon broke, deluging the countryside. Srihari's store-houses were growing larger and larger as more and more grain poured into them. Could a Praja Samity do anything for any-

body in such a place? Could it survive? At the very outset there would be a conflict with Srihari. It had, in fact, already begun.

Uchinge was sound asleep on the porch in front of him.

Uchinge, the grasshopper! Was he an example of what men of the next generation were to become in this village? Homeless, destitute, kinless, bereft of everything! Uchinge had only himself. Men strive to win the favours of Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune, for the sake of the warm nest which is their home. That nest had been shattered.

Padma's voice interrupted Jatin's thoughts. She came out carrying a tray of votive offerings. She had bathed and her clothes, though old, were freshly laundered. "I've rattled the chain fifty times!" she scolded. "What a boy you are! Are you deaf? It's lucky for me your friends have gone away. Here. Stand up. Let me anoint your brow."

Jatin smiled and rose to his feet. Padma put a spot of curd and turmeric paste on his forehead. "Today," she said, "your mother will be putting curd and turmeric on the door jamb."

"Uchinge! Uchinge!" Padma called. "How soundly he's sleeping! At this hour! O, Uchinge!"

Uchinge had begun to feel hungry. He had had a good sleep. He sat up.

"Get up! Get up! Stand here. Come on, get up. Let me anoint your forehead," Padma said.

"Give me some of the offerings!" Uchinge said. "I want some of the offerings."

"Wait a minute. Let me put a spot on your brow first," Padma laughed.

Uchinge held out his forehead, standing still like a good boy. Padma placed a dot of curd and turmeric in the middle.

"Touch her feet, Uchinge," said Jatin. "You have to do that, you know. Stand still a minute. Ma Moni, let me—"

"You're determined to send me to hell, aren't you?" Padma smiled, and gathering Uchinge up in her arms briefly, she swiftly fled into the house.

A hot breeze was blowing strongly and fitfully. Everything around Jatin shone in the brightness of the sunlight. He was lazing on the cot on his porch. It was a Chaitra noon. The new leaves that covered the big banyan, peepul and rain trees were pale with the heat. The rain had softened the ground and ploughing was in progress. Ploughmen were beginning to come in from the field; their skins, wet with perspiration, shone in the sun like oiled iron. The Bayen and Bauri women were returning

too, with baskets, full of cow dung, straw and wood which they had been gathering. A vine that covered the rain tree across the road was covered with blossoms. Bees hummed around it, weaving a web of low, sweet music. Several flowerpeckers danced from branch to branch. A koel was calling in the distance. The tree pie was silent. Who knew where it had gone? Flocks of parakeets, their eyes on the ripening sesamum, were flying about in the sky. Innumerable butterflies and wasps were fluttering and darting about, floating in the air like flowers blown down from the gardens of the gods.

The beauty of the village—its music, its colour, its fragrance—was faultless. There was an intoxication in it like the intoxication of reading a fine poem. It beckoned with a lifted hand. Jatin rose and left the house, responding to the call like a man under a spell. The song of a bird burst from a tree nearby. The song was most sweet, its melody was not only lovely in itself, but so musical and so articulate it seemed to be the rendering of a carefully composed song. Jatin entered the jungle warily, looking for the bird. He had not gone far when he became conscious of a strange scent of pungent sweetness. He went on, looking both for the bird and the source of the scent. Were they playing hide-and-seek with him? The further he advanced the further they receded. Strange! He thought the source of the scent must surely be the tree in front of him but when he reached it no blossoms could be seen and the bird was silent. Then suddenly the song of the bird burst from a tree farther on. The scent seemed fainter, its source farther away. Jatin made his way forward, walking like one enchanted.

"Babu!"

Who had called him? Wasn't it a woman's voice? Jatin looked around. Durga was sitting on the foot of a tree.

"Durga?"

"Yes." Durga had drawn her sari tightly around her body and tucked the end in at her waist. She seemed to be gathering something.

"What are you picking? What are those—"

Durga poured the contents of her cupped hands into his. What were these white, translucent globes, cleft like mitres? Ah! It was from them that the scent came! Durga had made a garland of them and hung it around her neck. Jatin looked at her in surprise. How fond she was of beautiful things! A strange loveliness radiated from her face and eyes and from her person. It was in the way she walked, the way she sat, in every gesture she made, even in her unruly hair!

"Honey flowers," Durga smiled softly.

"Honey flowers?"

"Mahua flowers, Babu. We call them Honey flowers."

Jatin lifted the flowers to his nose. The scent was strong and heady. He trembled. His head felt oddly light.

"The cow will give more milk if I feed her mahua flowers," Durga said. "I've come to gather them for her. And—"

"And what?" Jatin asked.

"And—and—you don't need to know, Babu."

"Why not? What's the objection?"

"We make wine from them."

"Wine?"

"Yes," Durga turned away and laughed. "We eat them raw too. They're very sweet."

Jatin tossed one into his mouth. The taste was really wonderful. It was intoxicating. He ate another. And another. His ears began to grow hot. His breath was hot. But how sweet the mahua was! There was nothing like it!

"There's trouble in the village," Durga suddenly grew alarmed. "do you hear that shouting? Listen." She picked up her basket and said, "I must be going, Babu, I must find out what's the matter."

She turned back and smiled. "Don't eat any more flowers, Babu. You'll get drunk."

"What?"

"Drunk. You'll become a drunkard."

Drunk. His head was feeling light and his whole body was burning. He felt hot and dizzy.

"Babu! Babu!"

Who was calling him this time? Who was it? Jatin went deeper into the jungle. It was Uchingé.

"There's a lot of trouble in the village, Babu. Kalu Shekh has taken the Baúris' cattle away."

"Taken the cattle away? Who is Kalu Shekh? Why did he do it?"

"He's Chiru Pal's bodyguard. Come and see. People are asking for you."

Jatin hurried back to the house. Uchingé climbed into a mahua tree. He went right up to the topmost branch and started eating the ripe blossoms.

Srihari had not forgotten. He was not a man to forget. And he now considered himself responsible for the maintenance of law and order in the village. He would not shirk this responsibility. It was for him to help the villagers in times of trouble and punish them when they were disorderly. Rebellion should be put down with a stern hand. Srihari had the right to do it. He admitted

that as long as he had been disorderly himself he had not had the right, but he was no longer the same man. He did nothing wrong any more. The whole village bore witness to his piety, his devotion to duty, his disinterested concern for the common good. He had built the temple pavilion, the Shasti Tola, the well, the new school house. Now he was making arrangements to do away with the drain beside the road that had been a dangerous eyesore for a long time. It was he, Srihari, who was making an effort to improve the sanitation of Sivkalipur. It was not only his right but his duty to put down any disobedience that threatened to disrupt the new order he was striving to establish. He did not, however, want to punish severely at the outset. The people who were demanding cash payment for thatching the pavilion, saying it was the zemindar's property, must be made to realise just how much they were benefitting from the zemindar's property, how many things they enjoyed free. It was not a matter of a few palm fronds. The only pasturage the cattle of the village had was on the zemindar's fallow land. So Srihari instructed Kalu Shekh to seize any cattle belonging to the Bauris and Bayens that were put to pasture on this land and impound them in Konkona. Kalu, eager to show his new master what he could do, carried out his orders immediately. It was also profitable for him. The officials of the pound habitually paid a small sum per head of cattle. Bhupal had shown Kalu which cows belonged to people obedient to Srihari. He omitted those, rounded up all the others and drove them to Konkona.

This was Srihari's second move in his campaign to restore order to the village. More moves would follow if this one failed to make people realise their mistake. He did not want to be hard at the beginning. He would not do anything wrong. He had won the favours of the goddess Lakshmi by the good deeds he had done in a former birth. He would not misuse his advantage. There is no merit greater than giving, no religion greater than mercy. This, Srihari vowed, he would never forget, even while doing what was necessary to preserve the peace. He had wanted to keep the cattle at his own house and restore them to their owners when they came and fell weeping at his feet. He would have explained gently to them wherein they were mistaken. The poor people would not have had to pay the fine which was not a light one imposed by the pound authorities or their charges for the food and care of the cattle. Srihari regretted it but he was quite helpless. That was the law. Doctor Jaggan and Debu were eager to get him into trouble and would be sure to submit a petition or start a case against him if he did anything contrary to the law. Srihari reclined among his cushions in the temple pavilion and puffed at his large water pipe as he

watched with lazy eyes as the well-wishers of the village attempted vainly to do something. How had the news spread so quickly?

The news had been brought by Tara, the barber. Tara Charan had been crossing the embankment when Kalu Shekh gave a terrible shout in mock rage to frighten away the cowherds who were clinging to him as he rounded up the cattle. They begged him to let them go, crying, falling at his feet. "Shekhji, dear Shekhji," they wailed, "we touch your feet. Let them go. Let them go just for this once."

Shekh had not been angry. All he wanted to do was to get rid of them, so he shouted, "Get away from here!"

Tara Charan had stopped. The frightened cowherds had fallen back but they did not abandon their charges. Two or three began to wail shrilly, a desperate, wordless wailing.

"You apes, you! Fools! You moles! Go home and tell people what's happened. Don't yell."

The cowherds did not understand. They followed the cows. The wailing went on without a break. "What'll we do? What'll do?"

"Off with you!" Shekhji whirled on them again.

The boys fell back a little but they started again as soon as he turned his back.

Tara Charan grasped the situation. He had sensed something was about to happen from hints dropped the day before while he was cutting Srihari's toe nails. Tara sped on to the village, cautiously entered Debu's house by the back door and gave him the news. "Do something quickly, Bhai," he said, "one anna per head will be charged for fodder. That makes two or three rupees! The pound closes at six o'clock. Tomorrow the fodder charge will go up. Two annas a head."

He left as he had come. Tara Charan did not doubt that Srihari was in the temple pavilion. If he saw him coming out of the pandit's house his suspicions were sure to be aroused. Tara screened himself behind underbrush as he made his way past the pavilion. He had guessed rightly. Srihari was there. An amused smile played over his face for an instant.

Debu stood silently staring at the ground for a few minutes. This was the blow he had been expecting. The responsibility for it was almost entirely his. He could not deny it. He had been waiting alertly in order to avert it from the heads of the poor Bayens by interposing his own person.

Where were they to find the money? Tara Charan had said an anna a head for fodder would come to two or three rupees. Then

there was the fine of four annas per head of cattle to be paid. There were at least forty or fifty cows. He calculated quickly. The fine would come to between ten and fifteen rupees. How could they pay it? They had no land, no property. All they possessed were tumbledown cottages and a few cows and goats. They sold milk, calves and goats and cow dung chips. Their livestock was their sole source of income. Ichhu Shekh might be willing to advance money but he would take two rupees for every one he gave. And, apart from that, Debu felt that he alone was responsible for their plight. A compromise might have been reached that day over the question of the fronds. The poor fellows, left to themselves, would have grovelled before Srihari, acknowledged his authority and been let off. But he had incited them to resist. How could he hesitate to help them today?

He thought a while longer. Then he straightened up, raised his head and called, "Bilu."

Bilu had heard what Tara Charan had said from inside the house. She had not gone away when he left and was standing in silence quite close to Debu. She too was thinking of the plight of the poor people whose cattle had been taken. How could anyone treat them like this! The wailing of the Bayen and Bauri women rose through the hushed heat of the summer noon, filling the air. Bilu felt like crying herself. Tears came to her eyes. When Debu called her she wiped them away quickly and went to him.

Debu examined her from head to toe. There was no gold on her. Gold jewellery is not usually worn in farmers' families. At the most the women wear a nose ring, rings in the ears, a necklace and conch bracelets bound with gold. Bilu had none of these left.

"What is it?" Bilu asked.

"Is there nothing?"

"What?"

"Nothing we can pawn for fifteen rupees or so?"

Bilu thought a few minutes. She seemed to be turning over in her mind the small stock of her treasures. Then she entered the house and came back with a pair of small bracelets.

Debu fell back. "The baby's?"

"Yes."

Bilu had clung to these bracelets which Debu's father had given to his grandson through all the trouble and deprivation she had suffered during Debu's absence.

"Take them," she said.

"Shall I take the baby's bracelets?"

"Yes, take them. You can have another pair made when you find the money."

"But if I can't redeem them from pawn or buy another pair?"

"The baby won't wear any bracelets."

Debu did not hesitate any longer. He took the bracelets and left the house.

It was evening before he returned. The cattle had been restored to their owners. He had been out in the sun for more than half the day. His clothes were wet with perspiration. Dust from the hooves of the cattle had settled over him.

There were a lot of people at Jatin's.

"What happened?" they cried in chorus.

"The cows are home again." Debu smiled with satisfaction.

"How much did it cost?"

"Jatin Babu!" Debu said, ignoring the question.

"Yes."

"Shall I tell you something?"

"Wait a minute. You're looking very tired. Have a cup of tea first."

"No, thanks. I must go home. Let me tell you before I go."

Jatin led Debu into his room.

"I'll take charge of the Praja Samity," said Debu.

"Wait! You can't go without tea!"

Jatin called into the house. "Ma Moni! Ma Moni!" There was no answer.

Padma was not at home. She had gone in search of Uchinga who had not yet returned. She had to find him.

Jatin himself put the kettle on.

Chapter 23

HAREN Ghosal was all excitement. "Praja Samity meeting! Praja Samity meeting!" he shouted as he strode up and down the roads of the village. His excitement was so great that he forgot to announce where the meeting was to take place. People collected in front of the detenu's house although arrangements had been made to hold the meeting at Dharmaraj Tola. "Why drag people all the way to Dharmaraj Tola?" asked Haren. "Let's hold the meeting here. We've a table and chair. And we can have tea whenever we want it."

Jatin's table and chair were carried out and a space quickly cleared. Haren had brought two garlands. He never forgot that.

The crowd was large. All the Bayens and Bauris were there, and the farmers too. The impounding of the cattle had agitated everybody. The villagers had built the embankments themselves. Did it belong to the zemindar? Cattle had always been put to pasture there. Land lying fallow in the village too was always used as pasture land. Indignation was general! For as long as they could remember cattle had been pastured on these lands. Didn't they have a right to do it? They had heard the pandit was to be elected President of the Praja Samity and they had come in a body out of gratitude to him. Nobody had ever done for them what he had. It was beyond their wildest expectations. They had no misgivings. Their hearts were full.

The name of the pandit was on the lips of every Bayen and Bauri that day. Even Durga's mother raised her voice in blessing. "May he live as many years as the hairs on his head! May his pen and inkstand be of gold! His son shall have sons! May fortune fill his home with happiness and riches! He is a man of gold a golden man our Pandit Mashay!"

Durga was thinking the same thing, lying on her bed, resting her chest on a pillow as she gazed out of the window. A man of gold, the pandit! How lucky Bilu was! Even the handsome detenu was outshone by the pandit that day. She felt like going to the meeting just to see him sitting head and shoulders above all the others. But she thought the better of it. After the meeting was over she would go to Bilu's and exchange a few pleasantries with Debu. She was wondering how she should start the conversation.

She had a lot of things to say to the detenu too.

"How did you like the honey flowers, Babu?"

Durga smiled to herself. She had seen the red rise in the corner of the detenu's eye.

But what was she going to say to the pandit?

Directly in front of Durga's house lay the Amarkunda. Beyond it was the embankment. A light appeared at the top. Some one was coming this way. The light descended into the fields.

The pandit was a quiet, reserved man. Durga sighed. Then suddenly she stirred with happiness. She had found what to say.

"Open a school again."

"Who will come to it?"

"If nobody else does, I will. I'll learn to read and write."

The light was coming towards the village. The legs of the

person with the lantern were visible by its swinging light. Who was it? Who were they? Two people were walking behind the bearer of the lantern. They were quite close now.

It was Bhupal the watchman! The man behind him was the head constable, the jamadar. An up-country constable came last. What was this? They passed, going in the direction of Chiru Pal's house. It was not unusual for the jamadar to visit Pal's house. Durga too had often been invited there in the old days. But why was the up-country constable with him? Why was he in uniform? He was wearing the full regalia of his office. The up-country constable was wearing a turban. Srihari's parties never started so early in the evening. They took place in the middle of the night, around midnight. Durga was alarmed. She suddenly remembered the detenu and the pandit. Why—she did not know—the thought of both of them came to her sharply. She left the house quickly and went out into the road. The night was dark. The moon had set already. Durga followed the men, moving silently through the bushes beside the road.

The temple pavilion was in darkness. Chiru Pal was not there this evening. A light was burning in the outer room of his office. Bhupal's lantern appeared. A party! This sort of thing could not take place in the temple pavilion! But nowadays Srihari—? Durga smiled mockingly at the thought.

Now and then a cow breaks loose in the night and strays into the fields. Having once tasted grain that way it can never forget it and it will break loose and go to the fields at night even if it is tethered with a chain. Chiru Pal reformed? Who was the new lady? There was some one for certain. Who was she? Durga's curiosity got the better of her. She knew the most secret ways of access to Srihari's house. How many nights she had gone there! She pushed her bracelets up her arm to prevent them from tinkling and made her way silently to the back of the room in which Srihari was sitting.

"Two years for sure," the jamadar was saying.

"Then let's go. A big meeting is in progress. Doctor Jaggan, that rascal Haren Ghosal, Girish, the carpenter, and Ani, the blacksmith, are all there. They're sitting around Debu Ghosh and the detenu. Come on. Get up. Let's go."

"I haven't had tea," said the jamadar. "Have some brought quickly."

So, Srihari had sent information to the police. The Praja Samity was holding a meeting at the detenu's house. Srihari hinted at a reward. The jamadar had his own expectations. He was sure to be promoted or rewarded, or both if he could catch the detenu in a conspiracy red-handed or in any other illegal activity and involve him in a police case. The very least he would

get would be a citation and a favourable departmental comment. Srihari's reward was an additional windfall. It was not to be entered in his calculations.

Durga shuddered. Swiftly she crossed the road, stopped to think for a few minutes and then began to walk slowly, shaking her bracelets so that they tinkled loudly.

"Who is it? Who is it?"

"Me."

"Who is me?"

"Durga of the Bayens."

"Durga! Ah, re! Ah, listen! Listen!"

"No."

"The Jamadar Babu is calling you," Bhupal came up to her.

Durga entered the room gaily. She was smiling. "The voice was familiar," she cried, "but I couldn't quite place it. If it isn't the Jamadar Babu himself! This is a lucky day for me. Whose face did I see first this morning?"

"Have you fallen in love or something?" the jamadar asked with a smile. "Tell me what it's all about. I heard you were sweet on the blacksmith. Now I'm told you're after the detenu."

"Your bosom friend here must have told you that nonsense!" Durga paused before going on "He is the Gomasta Mashay now, isn't he? I mustn't say Pal any more I suppose. Your dear Gomasta Mashay hasn't told you the truth because he is annoyed with me."

"Annoyed? He has a right to be, hasn't he?" the jamadar interrupted her. "Why did you give up such an old friend?"

"Friend? That dear friend of yours burnt the whole neighbourhood down, he did," Durga said indignantly. "And when I asked him for money to buy corrugated iron for a new roof he showed his thumb to me! Is that what you call a friend? Ask him whether it's true or not."

Srihari had turned pale. "What is Durga saying, Pal Mashay?" the jamadar said looking at him. The tone of his voice had changed suddenly.

Durga looked at the two of them. She sensed an understanding was in the offing. "I'll be back in a minute, Jamadar Babu," she said. "I'm going to the pond."

The jamadar did not answer her. His eyes were fixed on Srihari. Durga knew the meaning of that look. It was the prelude to the realisation of a penalty. Their parley would take some time. Durga turned back at the door, swung herself voluptuously and said, "You must buy me a drink today, Jamadar Babu! Good wine!" With that she went out.

The bank of the pond behind Srihari's house was covered thickly with low-growing jungle. The light of day never pene-

trated through the dense foliage of the huge rain trees and tamarind trees that hung over it. The bamboo clumps grew closely together. Thorny bushes covered the ground underneath. Nests of termites were everywhere and it was said snakes lived in these nests. Srihari's back pond was a well-known haunt of snakes, particularly chandra boras. Their hissing could be heard at any time of the day or night. Durga did not go down to the water. She turned and entered the jungle, passing through it as silently and fearlessly as a night-prowler. On the other side she came out into the road. Aniruddha's house was close to this spot. Durga darted like a shadow through the gloom and entered the house by the back door.

The election of the president of the Praja Samity was over. Aniruddha was serving tea. As the outgoing president Doctor Jaggan was about to launch upon a fiery speech. Debu was thinking of the responsibility he had just taken upon himself. The passing of a shadowy figure startled them. They saw it enter the house, swathed in white from head to foot. They heard the tinkle of bracelets and the sound of light swift feet. Who was it? Who? Who had passed that way?

Aniruddha hurried into the house. Was it Padma? Where had she been? Why had she come back running like that?

"Karmakar."

Durga. It was Durga's voice. Aniruddha went up to her, impatient with anger and irritation.

Durga gave him the news briefly and left as she had come, swiftly, with a soft tinkle of bracelets, vanishing mysteriously into the jungle on the other side of the road.

When she re-entered Srihari's house after washing her hands and feet in the pond the two men had apparently come to an agreement over the fine. The jamadar had a satisfied look in his eye. "Why are you out of breath?" he asked Durga, turning to her.

"Snake!" Durga widened her eyes in fright.

"Snake? Where?"

"At the pond. So-so-so big! A chandra bora. Look, Jamadar Babu!" Durga held her right foot out into the light. Two fresh drops of blood welled from two small incisions.

The jamadar and Srihari were alarmed. What bad luck! "Tie a ligature!" the jamadar cried. "A cord! Where's a cord? Pal, send for a cord."

As Srihari went in search of a cord he gave vent to his irritation. "Botheration! Delayed at a time like this!" He found a cord and handed it to Bhupal, saying, "Tie it around her leg. Jamadar Babu, come along. Let us finish what we have to do and come back."

Durga lifted a pale face and gazed piteously into the jamadar's eyes. "What will happen to me, Jamadar Babu? What will happen to me?" Her eyes shone with tears.

"Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid," the jamadar tried to be reassuring. He took the cord from Bhupal and sat down to tie it around her leg himself. "Run to the police station," he said to Bhupal, "and bring Lexin. Call any spirit doctor you know of."

"Send me home, Jamadar Babu," pleaded Durga. "Ogo, I want to die in my mother's lap! Take me home."

"That's best," Srihari interposed. "Bhupal, take her home. Call Dinu Ojha and Mite Goranchi. Run all the way to their houses and back. Come on, Jamadar Babu."

Jatin greeted the Jamadar Babu politely, lifting his hands to his forehead. "Jamadar Babu? So late?"

"I've been to another village," the jamadar said after a few minutes' silence. "I thought I'd drop in on you and your friends for a minute on my way back. But there's nobody here!"

"Please sit down for a chat since you've come," said Jatin. "You, too, Ghosh Mahay. Oh! re! Uchinge, put the kettle on for tea, will you?"

Bhupal took Durga home and went in search of the spirit doctors and Lexin. His shouting had roused the whole neighbourhood.

"What snake was it, sister-in-law?" Fatu's wife asked Durga over and over again. "Did you see it?" She was overcome with pity.

"Please," Durga cried plaintively, "don't crowd so." She began to toss restlessly. The people of this neighbourhood looked to Satish Bauri for advice and guidance. He knew all sorts of things and had remedies for most afflictions. Satish hurried away and came back in a few minutes carrying a root. It was one of his prescriptions for snake bite. "Chew this, will you?" he said, handing it to Durga. "Does it taste bitter or sweet?"

Durga put it into her mouth and spat it out again at once.

"It's bitter, is it? Then there's nothing to fear," Satish cried with relief.

"It's nauseatingly sweet," Durga declared, rolling on the ground. "Baba go! Who's that? Is it the spirit doctor?"

It wasn't. Doctor Jaggan, Haren Ghosal, Aniruddha and several others had come to see her.

"Make room! Make room!" shouted Haren Ghosal. "Clear a space around her! Clear a space!"

Jaggan sat down and took hold of Durga's leg. "Teeth marks," he said, "as plain as can be."

Tears were dropping from Patu's eyes. "What'll happen, Doctor Babu? What'll happen?" He wept.

"I'm giving her medicine," the doctor said, taking a knife out of his pocket. "Aniruddha, hold this permanganate, will you? When I make the incision pour it into the wound."

"No, no, no," Durga drew her leg away.

"No? Why not?"

"No, no, no. What's the good of cutting up a corpse?"

"Ghosal! Take hold of her leg, will you?"

Ghosal jumped. He had taken the opportunity to exchange meaningful glances with Patu's wife. He was smiling softly.

"No, no, no," Durga repeated.

"Die then!" Jaggan was annoyed.

Durga turned over. Her body was shaking. She seemed to be crying silently.

"Durga! Durga." Aniruddha's eyes filled with tears. He controlled himself with difficulty and pleaded, "Do what the doctor says."

Durga's body curled in a gesture of refusal.

Jaggan left in a dudgeon. Aniruddha went in search of a spirit doctor. There was one at Kusumpur, a Muslim. He was good. Haren lit a cigarette.

A light stopped a short distance away. Behind it were Srihari and the jamadar. Ghosal took the opportunity to slip away.

"How is she?" the jamadar asked Satish.

"Not very good. She's very restless."

"Hasn't Goranchi come?"

"Not yet."

"Ghosh, send another man. I'll bring the Lexin from the police station myself. Come on." They went away.

Durga tossed about restlessly for a while longer, then she felt better. "Satish Dada," she said, "your medicine is good. I feel all right now." Some time later she sat up.

"My medicine is infallible," said Satish.

"Take me into the house, sister-in-law," Durga pleaded.

Durga sat down on her bed and took a jasmine bud out of her chignon. She held it up to the light and turned it round and round.

"Did you see the snake?" asked Patu's wife. "What kind of snake was it?"

"A black snake," Durga answered. A sly smile played lightly in the corners of her mouth. She had not been bitten by a snake at all. On the way back from the Karmakar's house she had decided that it was the only way to gain time. At the landing place she had plucked the jasmine bud and made the

incisions herself, with the thorn on the stem. It would take time for the meeting to disperse. And would the jamadar have let her off? The thought of what he was like when he was drunk made her shudder.

But why hadn't the detenu and the pandit come to see her? They must have heard what had happened.

No one knew the truth. Why hadn't they come? The detenu was not permitted to go out at night. So he had good reason for not coming, particularly as the jamadar was in the village, and Chiru Pal was around. But the pandit. Why hadn't he come?

She felt hurt and her eyes filled with tears. Doctor Jaggan had come. Aniruddha had come. Haren Ghosal had come. The pandit had not come!

"Is it hurting again?" Patu's wife was distressed

"Go away. Go away I want to rest a little."

"No. You must not sleep today."

"I won't go to sleep. I'm not going to die." Durga was angry. "Please go. Leave me alone for a while. I won't die."

Patu's wife was offended. She got up and went out. Durga buried her face in her pillow and lay still.

"How is Durga?"

Who was it? Who was calling? Yes, it was the pandit. It was his voice, his step was on the stair.

"How are you, Durga?" Debu entered the room with Patu.

Durga did not answer.

"Durga!"

Durga raised her head. "I might have been dead by this time!" she said.

"I inquired after you and was told you were all right. The cowherd kept me informed."

Durga put her face back into the pillow. Damn it! cowherd!

"Thakur Mashay of Mahagram came to see me," Debu explained. "He arrived as I reached home. I've just seen him off."

"The Thakur of Mahagram?" Durga was surprised beyond measure.

The Thakur of Mahagram? Mahamahopadhyay Sivsekhareswar Nyaratna? He was god incarnate! Had he come to Debu's house—he did not set foot in the palaces of kings!

Debu was not a little surprised himself.

He was thinking of what Durga had done as he sat at home after the meeting. Durga was strange, a woman of many guises. Durga was incomparable. Bilu praised Durga to the skies when she heard what she had done. "She'll be born in a good family next time," Bilu said, "you'll see. She's like the courtesan of

the story, Lakhahire. And she'll have as her husband the man of whom she thinks at the time of her death."

"Mandal Mashay, are you at home?" some one called from outside.

The voice was authoritative but Debu could not make out to whom it belonged. "Who is it?" he asked in surprise, going out at once.

"It's me," the voice answered. "Biswanath's grandfather." The servant with the lantern lifted it so that the old gentleman could be seen.

Debu was too surprised to speak. Biswanath's grandfather! Pandit Mahamahopadhyay Sivsekhareswar Nyaratna! He trembled with excitement. The next instant he threw himself at Nyaratna's feet, in the dust of the road.

"I've come to give you my blessing," Nyaratna said. "May all good things come to you! May Dharma never abandon you! May you live long! Open the door! I want to sit in your house for a while."

Debu came to his senses. He sprang up and opened the door quickly. Bilu had been watching. She spread the best square of carpet she possessed for the old man; then she came forward, carrying a bowl of water.

"Do you want to wash my feet, Mother?" Nyaratna asked. "It's not necessary, you know."

Bilu stood where she was. Nyaratna sat down on the porch and held out his feet. "All right," he said.

Bilu washed his feet and wiped them carefully with a cloth of old silk.

"Bring your son to me, Mandal," said Nyaratna as he seated himself on the carpet in the room. "I wish to give him my blessing."

To Debu it seemed almost as though a deity had descended from heaven to bless his humble home that night. A magical sense of wonder enveloped him like a net. What great good fortune! Down through the darkness the divinity had come, to bless him, to bless his son, to bless Bilu, to fill their hearts with the greatest good, their home with the greatest wealth!

Bilu brought the sleeping babe into the room and laid him at Nyaratna's feet.

"Biswanath's son is younger than yours," he said as he gazed tenderly at the child. "He's only eight months old. The ceremony of the First Rice has just been held."

Nyaratna rested his hand on the head of the child and said, "May he live long! May fortune favour him!" Then he drew aside his shawl, took out a small pair of bracelets and handed them to Bilu. "Take them," he said.

Debu and Bilu were amazed. The bracelets were the baby's own bracelets which they had pawned that very morning!

"Take them," said Nyaratna. "You know you must not disobey me, Mother. Take them."

Bilu's hands shook as she took them.

"Put them on the child, Mother. Today is the Asoka Shasti. May your home be crowned with undying joy!" Nyaratna smiled and said, "Sakuntala told me about the impounding of the cattle. I was thinking of sending somebody myself to release them. Was Bhagavati, our Mother, the Holy Cow, to go without food? And the poor owners might have had to give all they possessed to pay the fine. I was relieved when I heard the fine had been paid and the cattle restored to their owners. I blessed you in my heart for doing it. It seemed to me that our people still had the spirit that would enable them to survive. I made up my mind to send for you some day, to bless you. Then Sakuntala, Biswanath's wife, came to me in the evening and said, 'Dadu, just see what the pandit of Sivkalipur has done! He has pawned his son's gold bracelets today, the day of Asoka Shasti! Mrs Chatterji showed them to me. She asked me if I didn't think they were a good bargain for fifteen rupees!' " Nyaratna paused. "An ineffable joy welled up in my heart, Mandal. I blessed you over and over again. But I felt troubled. To take away a son's bracelets on the Asoka Shasti day! He may have cried for them. I sent money to Mrs Chatterji at once and came myself to restore them to you. I did not feel like sending anybody else. Mother, put the bracelets on the babe! Mandal, I do not wish to embarrass you. You can pay your debt to me whenever it is convenient for you."

Tears were streaming down Debu's face.

Bilu was also crying. She slipped the bracelets on the baby's wrists.

"Debu Babu," Jatin called.

"Jatin Babu. Come in. Come in."

"So this is—?" Nyaratna asked.

Debu introduced them. Jatin studied the old man for a few minutes, then bowing to the ground he said, "I know your grandson, Biswanath."

Nyaratna greeted him with folded hands at first and then blessed him. "Do you know him?" he asked. "Is he one of you?"

"Not exactly," Jatin was a little surprised by the question. "We belong to different groups."

Nyaratna was silent.

"Tara told me you had come," said Jatin, addressing Nyaratna again, "so I hurried here as fast as I could. I came to see you."

"There's nothing to see. There's nothing worth seeing either in the country or in the people of the country. A great and beautiful palace was built but the roots of strangler fig trees have torn it apart. You see for yourself." He smiled and added, "It pleases me when, now and then, a lightning bolt strikes the ruins during a storm. Mandal had delighted me today."

"You were about to tell us a story." Debu changed the subject.

"Story? Yes, let me tell you an old story. Listen."

Once upon a time there was a Brahmin who was a great and good worker. He was as fortunate as he was skilled. The Lakshmi of Good Fortune took up her residence in his high and radiant brow. The Lakshmi of Good Fame took up her residence in his ability to work. So everything he undertook was noble and successful. His wife, his sons, his daughters and daughters-in-law enhanced the glory of his family. His lineage was without a stain for the Lakshmi of Lineage had taken up her residence in his house. Sin, with a heart full of envy and hatred, stalked around and around outside the Brahmin's house in futile rage. Sin could not bear the Brahmin's goodness. So one day, after a lot of thought, he brought a woman with him. She was Ill-Lakshmi, the goddess of Evil. He called the Brahmin out.

"What do you want?" asked the Brahmin.

"I am a poor unfortunate," answered Sin. "Trouble is overwhelming me. I beg you to give my companion shelter until better times come."

"It is my duty as a householder to give shelter to those who seek it," answered the Brahmin. "Your companion may remain here. She will be cared for as my own wife and daughters are cared for. You too are welcome as long as your bad luck lasts. Come in, both of you."

But Sin did not dare to enter the house of the Brahmin even though the Brahmin invited him in. Dharma resided there.

Ill-Lakshmi had no sooner gained entrance than misfortunes began to occur. The fruit in the orchards lost its taste and juiciness. Flowers lost their colour and scent. When the Brahmin sat down with his rosary in the evening he heard the sound of a woman wailing. He was surprised. When he rose from his devotions a light emerged from his forehead. The light gradually took the shape of a beautiful and radiant woman. It was she who had been crying.

"Who are you, Mother?" the Brahmin asked.

"I am the Lakshmi of your Good Fortune. I have lived very happily in your brow for so long it distresses me greatly to have to leave. I must go away."

"May I ask you a question, Mother?" the Brahmin said after a short silence. "What is my offence?"

"You have given shelter to Ill-Lakshmi. That woman is Evil. We cannot live in the same place."

The Brahmin sighed. He bowed to the feet of the goddess in silence.

The following morning he found the fruit had dropped off the trees, the flowers withered. The waters of the lake in his garden were draining away through breaches in the banks. His lands were arid and barren, his cows without milk. The Brahmin's house had lost its prosperous look.

Again that night he heard wailing. Again a light emerged from his body. Again it took the shape of a beautiful and radiant woman. She said, "I am the Lakshmi of Good Fame. The Lakshmi of Good Fortune has left you. Therefore I also am obliged to leave."

The Brahmin bowed to her feet in silence. She departed.

The next day he heard people had begun to say he was a man of evil character, that he coveted the woman to whom he had given shelter. He did not protest.

That night once again a light emerged from his body and took the form of a goddess. "I am the Lakshmi of Lineage. Ill-Lakshmi has come. Lakshmi of Good Fortune has left. Lakshmi of Good Fame has left. People are circulating slanderous reports about you. I am the Lakshmi of Lineage. How can I remain with you?"

She also departed.

The following day the Brahmin lost yet another deity. This time it was not a woman. A man emerged from his body. He was of heroic stature and serene of countenance.

"Who are you?" the Brahmin asked him

"I am Dharma," he answered.

"Dharma? For what offence are you leaving me?"

"You have given shelter to Ill-Lakshmi."

"Have I violated any of your laws in doing that?"

"No," answered Dharma after a little thought.

"Then?"

"The Lakshmi of Good Fortune has left you."

"She has not left me because I did anything contrary to the laws of Dharma. It is not against the laws of Dharma to give shelter to the afflicted who seek it. She left me because she could not live in the same house with Ill-Lakshmi."

"Yes"

"The Lakshmi of Good Fame followed her example. The Lakshmi of Lineage did the same. I made no protest. It was their way of behaving. But why should you leave me? What wrong have I done?"

Dharma said nothing.

"I cannot allow you to leave me. You exist in me and my life depends upon you. You have no right to abandon me. You cannot go unless I permit it."

Dharma realised his mistake. He was overwhelmed. "So be it! So be it! May you always conquer!" he said and re-entered the Brahmin's body.

Nyaratna had a delightful way of telling a story. He had given regular readings from the Bhagavat when he was young. With his musical voice and his descriptions he wove a spell that lingered. He felt silent.

"And then?" asked Jatin after some time.

"And then?" Nyaratna smiled. "There's not much to add.

That night the sound of a woman weeping was heard once more. It was Ill-Lakshmi, bewailing the influence of Dharma. She came and said, "I'm going."

"Are you leaving of your own free will?" asked the Brahmin.

"Yes, of my own free will. I'm leaving of my own accord." The woman vanished.

That night the Lakshmi of Good Fortune returned. The Lakshmi of Good Fame followed the next day. Then came the Lakshmi of Lineage.

"A wonderful story," said Jatin. "Lakshmi brings fame. She keeps the family pure. That's why there is such a scramble to win her favour. Lakshmi is everything."

"No," said Nyaratna, "no. Dharma. Mandal, you have taken your stand on the laws of Dharma. That is why I hurried to you with a heart full of hope and joy. Now I must go, Mandal!"

The cowherd ran up, bringing the news that Durga had been bitten by a snake. She was all right, he said, she was sitting up.

Debu set out with Nyaratna. He walked part of the way back to Mahagram with him. Jatin took leave of them and went home as they passed his house. He sat on his porch in silence for a long time.

Chapter 24

JATIN marvelled. Old Nyaratna lived in a sheltered corner of a village that was falling into decay all around him, in the midst of ignorance, poverty, illiteracy and uncharitableness. So hard and so cruel was the struggle for survival that it was slowly strangling the village like the coils of a serpent. Nyaratna's equanimity was undisturbed. He dwelt in quiet, radiant tranquility, lifting his eyes heavenward. With all the inexhaustible wealth of his vast learning he sat serenely on, like the power that resides in the depths of the sea.

Minute by minute, hour by hour, the darkness of the night deepened. Jackals howled and owls hooted during the second watch. A single owl kept on hooting from a tree nearby. There was a difference in its calling. It was not concerned with the changing hours of the night. Baby birds stirred in the hollows of trees. Their immature chirping was a drowsy whispering, almost a monotonous and subdued hissing. In the forest and jungle, by the roadside, at the ponds, in the houses, all around, a restless, ceaseless movement was taking place. There was the sound of innumerable insects. The black shadowy wings of bats rose into the darkness of space, swelled swiftly into flocks and passed, one, three together, one again. The stars were shining in all the fullness of their splendour for the sky had been clear since the storm. The breeze was the soft, slow breeze of Chaitra. Flowers filled it with the invisible, incomparable treasure of their fragrance. During the last watch the air thickened with dew.

Jatin had forgotten to ask the old man a question. He had liked the story very much. In it and in Nyaratna himself he had found a clue to the mystery of village life. For thousands of years such stories, the same stories, had been told to the young by the old. This story was not only good as a story, it was true. Only one thing aroused a doubt. It is true that the Lakshmi of Good Fortune has to depart when Evil or Ill-Lakshmi appears

and without her a man loses his ability to do good deeds. Therefore the Lakshmi of Good Fame leaves also. When a man loses his powers the glory of his family diminishes. Uching's mother had run off with a peon from the Settlement Camp. But what did Nyaratna understand by dharma? Jatin had not asked him that. He considered the question but he could not find a satisfactory answer, one which was in harmony with his newly-realised vision of world. He grew weary as he stared through the night at the slumbering village. His mind was empty.

The village seemed lost in the impenetrable darkness of the night. Jatin guessed the presence of the pond across the road. Light appeared there only once in the early evening, when two girls came to wash dishes by the glimmer of small kerosene lamps. Jatin could see their faces distinctly. When their dishwashing was done they returned to their houses and shut the doors. Doors are locked early in most village homes. Srihari Ghosh and Doctor Jagan kept awake later than others. So did several small opposition groups, his own among them, but not for long. By ten o'clock the village was quiet. Jatin looked at it. To him the trusting way the village laid itself down to slumber, so hushed and so still, was childlike. It surrendered to sleep like a helpless infant.

Suddenly Jatin remembered the place of his own birth, the metropolis of Calcutta. He loved the city. Calcutta was one of the great cities of the world! How little influence the darkness of night or the brightness of day had there! Lights burned all day. The streets were lined with lights at night. Confronted with the shining eyes of man's achievement the darkness stopped on the city's threshold, paralysed, defenceless. At every crossing stood a wide-eyed watcher who intermittently proclaimed his wakefulness. The scientist in his laboratory kept vigil with unsleeping eyes. The mechanic stood resolutely, his hand on the switch of swift-moving machines. Wheels turned. Production went forward. Steamers churned the water as they rode on its waves. The Port Commissioner's train passed down the track. Shuntings. Sidings. Cars roared down the streets. Now and then the pounding of horses' hooves awoke a romantic echo. The great city was in constant motion. Its movement never ceased by day or by night. Coming and going, breaking down and building up, tears and laughter assumed ever changing and ever new forms.

The village has only one face. A village is a strange place, particularly in this country. Its social structure has been fixed for all time, like an immortal who sits on in the same spot forever. He recalled what Sir Charles Metcalfe had said in his study of Indian economics: "They seem to last where nothing else lasts." Strange! "Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; re-

volution succeeds revolution: The Hindu, Pathan, Mogal, Maharratta, Sikh, English are masters in turn, but the village community remains the same."

Would it never bestir itself? Great changes have come to the world in the twentieth century. A new order is appearing everywhere. Would there be no change in the ancient immobility of the villages in this country? The worn lethargy of the old?

Jatin was a young revolutionary. He dreamt of the time to come and sighed. Nyaratna had spoken of a mansion split asunder by the roots of strangler fig trees. He resolved to help the process. He would rain blow after blow upon the already weakened structure. And in pursuit of his purpose he would fan the flame of any dispute, however slight, that came to his notice.

Someone knocked on the door from the inside.

"Ma Moni?" Jatin asked.

"Yes," said Padma, "aren't you going to bed? Do you want to make yourself sick?"

"I'm coming," Jatin answered.

"Come. This instant. I'll fan you to sleep. Come along. Get up and come in."

"Go to bed! I'll be coming right away."

"No. You must come in right now. No more of this."

Jatin had to go into the house. Padma did not leave him in peace. "Open the inside door," she said, "let me fan you. It's so hot."

"It's not necessary," Jatin said.

"It is. You need it."

Jatin opened the door. Padma seated herself at the head of his bed, fan in hand. "He went out when he heard Durga had been bitten by a snake and hasn't come back yet," Padma said. "Would you—?"

"Hasn't Aniruddha Babu come home yet?"

"No. Just wait, though. Let Durga die first. He'll come then, floating on his tears. So many people die! But that son of a—!"

Jatin shuddered. There was so much hatred in Padma's words and her tone of voice! He sighed and shut his eyes. A loud noise awoke him. The noise advanced swiftly. The doors and walls of the room began to rattle and shake. He sat up and cried, "Earthquake!"

Padma laughed. "What a child you are! That's not an earthquake, you silly. It's the Mail train passing. Lie down!"

"Mail train? A train?"

"Yes, go to sleep."

The train whistled shrilly as it mounted the bridge over the Mayurakshi River. The night filled with the rush and rattle of its passage. The house was shaking. Lights blazed at the junction station. The mills worked all night. The junction was not far away: it was just across the river. Jatin seemed to glimpse the light of hope. The new life-to-come had reached the station. The village was shaking. A day would come when this life would cross the river. A company was already negotiating for a bus route along the road which ran past the embankment.

Padma put down her fan and left the room not long after, after Jatin fell asleep. The mosquito net had not been tucked in tightly enough upstairs. Mosquitoes might have got in and begun to bite Uching!

But Padma was surprised to find Uching had come downstairs and was sitting on the porch. He was playing with cowries. In the middle of the night.

Jatin woke late. He had gone to sleep so late! Padma woke him! "Get up! Get up!"

"It's late, isn't it?" Jatin sat up.

"A terrible thing is hapenning."

"What?"

"Chiru Pal's men are cutting down the trees. Everyone has run to the spot. There may be a fight."

"Who's gone running there? Aniruddha Babu?"

"Everybody. Everybody. The pandit. Doctor Jaggan. Ghosal. Lots of people."

Jatin was pleased. "Make me a nice strong cup of tea, will you, Ma Moni?" he asked.

"You're not to go dancing off after the others."

"Then why did you wake me?"

"I don't know," said Padma, after a minute. She did not really know why she had called him. "Have a wash. I'm making tea."

"Where's Uching?"

"He's a straw before the flood. He ran to see what was hapenning."

Srihari was taking his revenge for the insult of the day before. He had been humiliated in front of the Bauris and Bayens. Not only humiliated! He regarded what had happened as an attempt to destroy the village order. He had made arrangements to punish the miscreants that very evening. Ruffians were engaged through Kalu Shekh to cut down trees belonging to Aniruddha, Doctor Jaggan, Debu Ghosh and Haren early in the morning. He gave the orders as the zemindar's gomasta. The trees were

on fallow land. The zemindar had never objected before to tenants planting trees on his fallow land. They had always done it. If the zemindar needed the fruit or a branch or two for any special purpose he would speak to the tenant before taking them. But he had never cut the trees down. He had tried it once and the tenants had rioted. That was over a hundred years ago. In the fifty years that followed the spirit of the times had changed. Tenants sat submissively at home lamenting their trees or fell at the zemindar's feet. Suddenly, today, they had once again come running out to defend them.

Jatin grew anxious for news. It would be terrible if there was bloodshed. He was wondering whether he ought to go. No. If he got involved in it, the incident would take on an entirely different colour.

Padma had looked in three times already to see that he was in his room.

"I'm here, Ma Moni," he said the last time. "I haven't gone."

"There's no trusting you! You're a terrible boy!"

Jatin laughed.

"Don't laugh! No, you mustn't laugh." Padma looked out at the road as she spoke. "Oh—ee! There now, Nelo's coming. Get your money out!"

Nelo, the boy who painted, was coming. He came only when he needed money, sitting silently on one side. Unless he was asked he did not say a word. But he did not go until he was asked and then he said only, "Paisha." He did not demand much. Anything from four paisa to four annas satisfied him. But that day Nelo was excited. His pale face was flushed, his eyes restless. He did not sit down. He stood in front of Jatin.

"What is it, Nelo? Money?" he asked.

"The pandit's head has been spilt open."

"Whose? Debu Babu's?"

"Yes. And Chaudhury's. Old Chaudhury of Kaapur."

"Dwarka Chaudhury Mashay's?"

"Yes. The pandit's mango tree was being cut down. The pandit placed himself right in front of the axe."

"Then?"

"The rough fellows started pushing and pulling him. Old Chaudhury tried to set him free. They were both thrown down on the ground."

"Thrown down?"

"Yes. Their heads hit the chopped end of the tree and spilt open."

"Then?"

"They're bleeding badly. They are being carried in."

"What are the others doing?"

"They're just standing around. Nobody went forward. Anirudha was the only one. He hit one of the fellows and ran away."

"Where's the doctor?"

"He's gone to the junction to inform the police."

Jatin entered his room and sat down to write telegrams. One to the District Magistrate. One to the Sub-Divisional Office. And a letter to the District Congress Committee. This would have to be dispatched secretly.

The doctor could send the telegrams but the letter could not be entrusted to him. If Debu had been able to go he was the man to take it. Jatin thought for a few minutes and then called Nelo.

"Can you do something for me?"

"Yes," the boy nodded.

"This letter has to be posted at the junction Post Office. A four paisa stamp has to be purchased and stuck on it. How about it?"

Nolin nodded again.

"It must not be shown to anybody."

Nelo's silent nod showed he understood.

"Buy the stamp with these four paisa. And buy yourself something to eat with these other four."

Nelo tucked the letter into his waistband and covered it carefully. He tied the coins in the corner of his shawl. Then he bent his head and walked rapidly away.

The whole village was agitated.

Chaudhury Mashay was carried to Doctor Jaggan's dispensary. Debu was able to walk. He was young and strong and he was excited. He was not weakened or frightened by the loss of blood although he was bleeding badly. Old Chaudhury's injury was more serious. He had lost consciousness and did not regain it until he had been brought in. He was lying with his eyes closed. Debu sat leaning against a wall. He was silent. His forehead had been washed and bloodstained water was dripping from it. The villagers were crowding around the dispensary.

Hot water, tincture of iodine, cotton wool. The doctor was busy with the bandage. Haren was helping him. Now and then he called out, "Clear a space! Stand aside!"

Ranga Didi was sitting under a tree, crying. Durga was looking on in silence, her teeth clenched. Jatin arrived at the dispensary.

"I've stopped the cutting of the trees," said Doctor Jaggan. "The police have inspected the spot and issued a notice. Neither party to the dispute can go near them. I told everybody not to

do anything until I came back from the junction. But when I got back I found Debu had got himself hurt. And Chaudhury. Aniruddha hit one of the men in the back and ran away."

"I'm all right." Aniruddha stepped out of the crowd. "I'm not a woman!" He was carrying his axe. "I didn't have this with me," he said, "or something would have happened right enough."

"Bandage these two quickly," said Jatin, "other things can come later."

"Pranam," old Chaudhury opened his eyes and smiled gently.

"How do you feel?" asked Jatin returning his greeting.

"All right. I thought I could stop them. Debu placed himself right in front of the axe. I couldn't stand there and do nothing."

Nobody spoke. There was nothing to say.

"The pandit," the old gentleman went on, "is a person of whom we can be proud. He's not only learned. He's brave. My eyes are still good. By the grace of God I have been spared spectacles so far. Debu himself doesn't know how he looked when he threw himself in front of the axe. A hero!"

"What good did it do?" said Doctor Jaggan. "That's just being obstinate. Don't be angry with me, Debu Bhai."

"Debu's tree is the only one still standing, Doctor," Chaudhury smiled, "all the others have been cut down."

Jaggan began to scold Haren loudly. "Which way are you looking? Keep your eyes on what you're doing!"

Haren jumped.

Debu smiled. The doctor was angry with old Chaudhury.

A police inquiry was held.

Srihari did not deny anything. Dasji who was now the zemindar's district agent, spoke on his behalf. He was an experienced, shrewd, worldly man. He knew more about the laws governing tenants' rights and criminal procedure than most ordinary lawyers. Srihari had sent for him. The affair had ceased to be a personal matter for Srihari and was no longer confined to the village. What he had done had been done as the zemindar's gomasta. Therefore the responsibility for his action was shared by the zemindar.

The zemindar was a young man, the son of the kind of zemindar common in Bengal at that time. He knew English and did not like a zemindar's job very much. He had tried business several times and failed. His zemindari was his last resource. He was trying to introduce correct legal procedure and disliked very much the violent methods traditionally employed by land-

owners. But he did not have a strong personality and his efforts bore no fruit. He made rules in the interests of his tenants but when he needed money for a trip to Calcutta he was forced to agree to whatever his steward or gomasta proposed. In Calcutta he attended theatres and cinemas, drank a little and went to political meetings to see what was going on. He was a member of the Union Board. At the last election to the Local Board he had been defeated. That year, 1928, a special session of the Indian National Congress was to be held in Calcutta. He was already making efforts to get himself appointed a delegate.

The zemindar was not pleased when he was told what had happened. He said, "I passed no such orders. Srihari must be taught a lesson. Deny all responsibility for the affair."

Dasji smiled as he answered. "Where will you find another gomasta like Srihari? Think it over. He's picked a quarrel with the villagers. He has exceeded his authority as a gomasta. All that's true. But he pays you your revenue on time, every pice of it, whether he's able to collect the money or not. And he's lent you money, some two thousand rupees, on your hand-note. The Settlement Survey will soon be demanding a share of its expenses. For Sivkalipur alone you'll have to pay over a thousand, and other villages will cost you more. Is it wise to dismiss Srihari at such a time?"

Among his equals the zemindar had a reputation for being a plain-speaker. He could also say a few words at a public meeting. But when Dasji began to speak out as he was doing now, the poor man gasped like a drowning person, stretched out his arms and surrendered helplessly.

"Why not sell Sivkalipur to Srihari outright?"

"Sell Sivkalipur?"

"Yes. If we keep him on as gomasta incidents of this kind will recur. Srihari will take the village eagerly enough. He'll get a little over two thousand. And, apart from that, there are the Settlement expenses. Five thousand in all."

"See if he'll buy it." The zemindar had no objection to his property changing hands. He said, "This is work of a policeman, not a landowner."

At the inquiry Dasji modestly admitted everything. "Yes," he said, "we gave orders to cut down the trees on behalf of the zemindar. Srihari acted in the capacity of gomasta when he engaged men to do the work. We Hindus do not cut trees in the month of Baishakh so it had to be done in Chaitra. Wood for the whole year is stocked at this time."

"Cut down your own trees," said Doctor Jaggan. "Why should the zemindar—"

"The trees are our own," Dasji interposed. "Those trees belong to the zemindar."

"The zemindar?"

"Tell us whose they are yourself."

"The trees belong to us."

"Yours? Have you ever cut branches from them?"

"No, we don't cut branches. But we have always enjoyed their fruit."

"Yes. The fruit. You also gather palm fruit and cut fronds from the zemindar's palm trees. And you gather cotton from the silk cotton trees. Villagers catch fish in the khash ponds, which have been parcelled out among you. Ram, Shyam and Jadu catch fish in one. Kali, Kanai and Hari catch fish in another. Bhabesh, Debesh and Jogesh catch fish in a third. Do these ponds and palm trees belong to you?"

"Das Mashay," Debu spoke at last, "if these trees are the property of the zemindar why did you send ruffians to cut them down? It is only necessary to assert a right by violence where no such right exists. Or where there are grounds to apprehend that the right will be misused. That is to say, violence is required only in cases where the right is dubious."

"No," Dasji answered with a smile, "we did not send any ruffians. We sent the zemindar's personal guards. They carry lathis, as a symbol of their office. For example—the music played at a wedding is indicative of the status of the parties. One drum and a pair of cymbals is enough if, say, a member of your family marries a member of mine. There may or may not be an oboe as well. But when a wedding takes place in the zemindar's family a whole orchestra announces the fact. The zemindar's men were sent to cut down some trees. They cut five or six. But thirty or thirty-five others accompanied them. Among them were eight or ten guards. Was that too many? If we had known you were going to riot and cause a breach of the peace we would have sent at least fifty. The police would have been informed in advance that a breach of the peace was apprehended. You know the law, Debu Babu. Tell us, to whom do the trees belong?"

The daroga came to conduct the inquiry himself. He was a good officer and did not abuse his power. "This is a bad job, Dasji," he said, "any way you look at it. It isn't wise to antagonise people. The law is just barely on your side, no more than that. It's a case of civil rights and there's nothing for us to do. I've issued a notice forbidding both parties to go anywhere near the trees until the case is settled in court. It will be a criminal

act if they do. We'll send them up. The police will be obliged to institute a case.

"You know, don't you, Dasji," the daroga said as he rose to leave, "the laws relating to tenants' rights are being amended."

"Of course I do, sir," Dasji smiled. "It will be a great relief to us, Daroga Babu."

Srihari sat down with Dasji in his private office after the daroga left. Srihari's private office was new. The steps, verandah and floor were of cement although the roof was thatched. "Fine!" Dasji exclaimed admiringly. "You've made a nice place for yourself here! You know, don't you, that song of Nilkantha's: 'Acquire a zemindari if you want a permanent home!'"

Srihari brushed dust from the rug on his divan and said, "Sit down."

"Would you like to buy yourself a zemindari, Ghosh?" Dasji asked as he took his seat.

"A zemindari?" Srihari was surprised. He had never dreamt of having a zemindari—not very definitely, that is. "Which revenue district? Is it a nearby moujah?"

"Sivkalipur itself. Will you buy it?"

Srihari looked at Dasji questioningly. He was strangely pleased. The Sivkalipur zemindari? Every person in the village would become his tenant! Srihari would be the master, the lord, the Babu Mashay! The thought thrilled him. He began to make plans at once. He would establish a market in the village. He would have a pond excavated for bathing. In place of the shrine he would build a temple, tear down the thatched pavilion and build an open hall. He would convert the Primary School into a Middle English School and the name of it would be 'Srihari M. E. School'. He would stand for election to the Local Board

"Buy it, Ghosh," Dasji said. "You have money. A zemindari never depreciates in value. Your enemies in the village will, in due course, grovel at your feet. Buy it before the publication of the Settlement Survey. And apply to have your name changed officially. The Five Dhara Court will follow the publication. Revenue rates will be raised by at least four annas to the rupee. There's a precedent in the High Court for an eight anna raise. I've looked it up already. Listen to me. I'll get it for you at a reasonable price. Yes. Close the door, will you?"

Srihari closed the door.

They talked a long time and came out smiling. "This notice is worthless," said Dasji. "It isn't valid at all. If anybody goes there and there is a breach of the peace, this will happen and that will happen. It is true. But if there is no breach of the peace?" Dasji pressed his lips together and smiled,

"Then I can go ahead and do it?" Srihari asked.

"Certainly. But be careful. Nobody must know. There must be no trouble."

"And what shall I do about the Gajon?"

"Whatever you like."

"Shall the temple pavilion stay as it is then?"

"Don't do that, Ghosh. I'm forbidding you to do it. The common people have a right to the temple pavilion even if the zemindar is the trustee. Build a temple in your own house if you must and a hall as well. Property can be kept and property can be lost. If you ever lose yours you'll not have any rights left at all."

Dasji was advising Srihari not to spend any money on the temple pavilion. When times are bad it is foolish to spend money for the benefit of others.

The following morning there was another sensation in the village.

Debu Ghosh's mango tree had been cut down and carted away the night before. Who had taken it? Srihari. The law had not been broken. There was no breach of the peace. A stump three or four inches high was all that was left. The history of what had taken place during the night was written in a few scattered splinters, some fresh leaves, green mangoes, twigs like slender young fingers, and the marks of wheel and hooves imprinted in the soft moist ground.

"It's a case of theft! A case of theft! Handcuff him and send him up!" Ghosal was stamping about and shouting.

"No, don't say such things," Debu protested.

"Let's catch the noon train. Lodge a complaint," said Jaggan.

"No," Debu said.

Debu walked slowly to Jatin's house and sat down beside him.

"I heard the tree was removed last night," Jatin said.

Debu smiled faintly.

"I'm telling him to start a case," said the doctor. "Debu refuses to do it."

"What's the use of starting a case? The tree belongs to the zemindar according to the law. What's the good of wasting money?"

"Are you downhearted already, Debu Babu?"

"Yes, I am. I can't carry on like this any longer."

"Wait a minute. Have a cup of tea. Uchingel! Uchingel!" Uchingel appeared with another boy.

"Tell Ma Moni to make tea."

"Where did the other one come from?" asked Jaggan. "Ram could not provide for himself yet he had Sugrib to provide for too."

"He's a friend of Uching's. They were friends at the station. He followed the police here yesterday to see the tree cutting. They met again. Uching brought him here."

"You're sitting pretty, Mashay! A retinue of riff-raff! You do attract them!"

"Uching brought him to Ma Moni, not to me."

"You mean to the blacksmith's wife?"

"Yes," Jatin smiled.

"Aniruddha will beat him up and turn him out."

"They talked it over yesterday. Aniruddha Babu wanted to turn him out. Ma Moni said he could look after the cows in return for his food. Aniruddha has bought some cows, you know. The boy can tend them and work the bellows in the smithy too."

"Take the tea, Babu," said Uching.

A drum had begun to beat. Uching put the cup down on the porch so quickly part of the liquid spilled into the saucer. He jumped up and ran down the road. "Dang! Dang! Nyatang!" He imitated the sound of the drum and cried, "Come on, Gobra. Siva will rise now."

The drum of Gajon! The Gajon Siva is raised from the waters on this day.

"Do you know who the bhaktas are, Ghosal?" Jaggan asked.

"I heard there are five of them this year," Haren said.

"Let's go and see what's going on."

"Let's go."

Jaggan and Haren got up and left.

"Debu Babu?" Jatin said.

"What is it?"

"What are you thinking?"

"Just thinking—" Debu laughed. Then he said, "Would you like to see it?"

"What?"

"Come with me."

Srihari's house was not far away. His threshing floor could be seen from the road. A large crowd had gathered there. A pile of golden grain was in the centre. Beside it was a large tripod with wooden scales. Srihari was sitting on a chair underneath a tree. Grain was being measured out and weighed. "Ten rams! Eleven! El—e—ven! Eleven rams!" The monotonous counting repeated each number over and over again. Several people present hid themselves when they saw Debu and Jatin.

"Did you see that?" Debu asked.

In reply Jatin quoted Tagore's well-known song:

If no one comes with you,
Responding to your call,
Go on alone! Go on alone!

But a little later he said, "Mak
You'll suffer a lot if you don't.

"That doesn't worry me," Debu answered, "I'm thinking about the Gajon. It used to be a great occasion in our village. Everybody worked to make it a success. We even competed with the villages around. Will it all disappear? Or will it gravitate into Srihari's hands too, like everything else? Will we lose our right to our gods? Are we not even entitled to them?"

Nelo came up.

"What news, Nelo?" Jatin asked.

"Give me eight annas. I want to make dolls to sell at the fair. There's to be a fair at the Gajon this year. Srihari's making the arrangements."

"A fair? Srihari?" Debu straightened up.

"Nelo really draws well," said Jatin as he gave him the money.

"His mother's father was a famous potter," Debu said.

"Potter? Nolin is bairagi, isn't he?"

"Yes. When china dolls became the fashion the old potter was reduced to begging. He turned a Vaishnava. And of course he had to turn a Vaishnava to enable his widowed daughter to marry again." Debu was silent for a while. Then he said, "Srihari is celebrating the Gajon in a big way."

Chapter 25

JATIN was awakened by the sound of drums. It was not yet light when the drums started. In the old days the drums of Gajon had begun to beat on the first day of Chaitra. This year and the year before they had started on the twentieth of the month. Because Patu had lost chak in lands, a drummer from another village had been engaged for cash payment. The deep

thunder of the drums in the early morning had a solemnity which delighted Jatin. In the half-dark and silent early hours of the day they seemed to purify the air with their splendid urgency. He opened the door and went out.

Jatin was surprised to find the village already stirring. The thud of a husker was audible. Women were out on the roads. Each was carrying a pot of water on their way to the pavilion to pour libations at the shrine of Siva. Ranga Didi was reciting the names of the thirty-three crores of gods so loudly and clearly she could be heard from where he was. One or two of the Gajon bhaktas had already bathed and were on their way home. They sang out:

Sivo, heh! Hara! Hara! Bom! Take the name of Sivo! Sivo!

Jatin rose early but he did not usually get up till it was brighter. The village at this hour presented an aspect that was new to him. When he left his bed the women had usually finished their sweeping and prayers and were busying themselves with the work of the day. Old Ranga Didi would be cursing her gods and her forefathers!

The back door of Aniruddha's house opened. Uching and Gobra slipped out stealthily, two shadows in the indistinct darkness. Padma followed them, carrying a pot of water.

An ox cart loaded with manure creaked by, grating discordantly. Work in the fields began while it was still night. Fertiliser was being spread over the ground and ploughing started. Yokes and ploughs were in the carts, on top of the manure. The texture of the soil was just right now. The sun had dried the stickiness out of it and it was just moist enough for farming. The plough-share would plunge up to its neck in the soft loam, cutting through it like a knife through cheese, easily, unobstructed. On either side of its wake two deep ridges would fold back. The soil would not cling to the blade. Any earth on it dropped off at a light tap. The oxen pulled smoothly. Such ploughing gladdens the hearts of farmers. Their breasts stir like the soil itself.

Six pairs of oxen passed in a line, followed by four carts of manure. The beasts were large and strong, a delight to the eye. They belonged to Srihari who had ten ploughs and a dozen plough-hands. His prosperity was reflected in everything he owned.

Jatin dressed and, leaving the house, went out into the fields. The land lay open to the horizon. The high bank along the Mayurakshi River edged it. It was topped by a green line of young reeds and out of them palms rose. Here and there stood a flame-of-the-forest tree, a silk cottonwood, a rain tree or a tamarind tree. The chimneys of the town rose into the sky be-

yond them, indistinct in the early light. Mill whistles blew shrilly, five or six together.

Jatin crossed the fields, climbed the embankment and then he went down into the river bed. The tall grass, freshened in the recent rain, was growing thickly and sturdily. Here and there amidst the green were carefully tended patches of yellowish brown earth in which vegetables had been planted. The seedlings were lifting their heads like the hoods of green snakes and beginning to coil over the ground. Guinea fowls were flying about in search of food. They plunged their beaks into ant holes and termite nests, devouring the hapless insects. At the sound of Jatin's approach the birds spread their wings, rose and disappeared into the nearby jungle.

The sky was reddening. Jatin stood on the river sand as the sun appeared on the horizon. The vernal equinox was due in a few days. The river flowed eastward here.

Jatin crossed it and climbed towards the town. He had to report at the police station twice a week. He usually walked over after a morning cup of tea. But that day he decided, since he had come so far, led by the freshness of the early day, he would report before he returned to the village.

News of further trouble reached him as soon as he set foot in Sivkalipur. Trouble had broken out repeatedly during the last few days, disrupting the quiet rhythm of village life. Srihari's new garden had been wrecked. Rumours, excited whisperings, conjectures, agitated everybody. Srihari was stamping around the temple pavilion, nearly tearing his hair in chagrin and rage. He was the old Chiru.

Opposite the river on the high ground to the north of the village, where there was no danger of flooding, Srihari had recently excavated a lake and was planting a choice garden around it with rare and expensive saplings. Mango sapling from Malda and Murshidabad, lichis and rose apples from Calcutta, bananas from Kanaibanshi, Amritasagar, Kabuli and many other places. And he had also planted flowering bushes and trees: asoka roses, gardenias, bokul and champa.

Srihari planned to build a small two-roomed cottage in the garden, with a path leading down to the lake. He had planted two rare trees on either side of the proposed steps. The road entering the garden was lined with asoka saplings. Seats were to be built beneath them when they reached a good size. Srihari and his friends planned to visit the garden in the evenings and pass the nights there too sometimes, in pleasant self-indulgence. Music, good drink, good food! Like the Konkona gentlemen!

The garden had been completely uprooted during the night.

"I'll cut their heads off!" Srihari was shouting at the top of his voice.

He believed it had been done by the people whose trees he had cut down. Like Aswatthama, who, in his cowardly hatred of the Pandavas, stealthily slew their babes at night under cover of darkness, his enemies had destroyed his young trees. Srihari was not going to let them get away with it. He would cut the jewel out of Aswatthama's head in revenge. He had sent word to the police station through Bhupal, who, meeting Jatin on the road, had informed him of the events.

Haren Ghosal was very upset. He was terrified of Srihari when he was in this wild mood. As Chiru Pal, Srihari had once held his head under water and then, seizing him by the back of his neck, rubbed his face in the dirt. Chiru showed respect neither to Brahmins nor to gentlemen.

"Jatin Babu, the case is serious," Haren said when the detenu returned, sitting down beside him with a shrunken look. "Chiru Pal is furious."

Jaggan Ghosh was delighted. He compared the event with the subtlest of all judgements, the Judgement of God. He expounded his theory in the Sanskrit he had learned in Class Three. An enemy of the bull had been killed by a tiger. *Sandashya satru byaghrena nipatitah.*

"No, Doctor," protested Debu, "what has been done is very wrong. It is a shame!"

"You're Yuddhisthir himself, you are," the doctor said, "you have to be left out of such things."

Debu did not answer. He was not offended. He was however genuinely sorry for what had happened. Srihari had taken a lot of trouble over his garden. Debu was sorry even though Srihari had cut down his mango tree, for he had a great love for trees. Year after year the trees in Srihari's garden would have filled with flowers and fruit for generations of men if they had been allowed to grow. Trees live longer than men. Srihari's children and grandchildren would have enjoyed the flowers and fruits of those trees. The fruit would have been offered to the gods, and distributed among the villagers. How much joy and nourishment they would have bestowed upon men. Should they have been destroyed?

"The daroga has come," announced Uching, steaming up with a whistle in imitation of a train.

"Where?" Haren was alarmed.

But Uching had disappeared into the house. Gobra answered. "He's had a look at the lake and garden. Now he's coming to the village."

Doctor Jaggan was also alarmed. "Jatin Babu," he said, "the fellow is sure to suspect us. He may issue warrants. The police will probably send us up. You must arrange for bail. Write to the Congress Secretary."

"Pandit," said Durga, coming up.

"Durga?" Debu had been lying on Jatin's wooden cot. He sat up.

"Yes. Come home."

"Why?"

"The police have come to search your house. Doctor, a constable is standing in front of your house too."

"My God!" Haren was the first to stand up. "My mother's copy of the Gita!"

A constable approached. With him were three village watchmen whom he posted at the three doors of Aniruddha's house.

"Brother-in-law," said Durga as Debu followed her home.

"What is it?"

"If there's anything, give it to me. I'll bring it out of the house concealed in my clothes."

"There isn't anything. What could there be?"

The Sub-Inspector was standing at the door. "Pandit," he said, "we've come to search your house. Durga, stay out."

"My milk pot is in there, Daroga Babu. Why are you making a fuss over me?" Durga was indignant.

"You're a bad one, Durga," the daroga laughed good naturedly. "Where is your milk pot? The watchman will fetch it."

"Come in, Daroga Babu," Debu said. "Durga, wait here. I'll bring you the milk pot."

"Sit in an open place, Durga," the daroga said. "See that no snake bites you! Nor a centipede neither!"

Debu had not thought of one thing.

The police searched the house, looking keenly at the axe, scythe and bill hooks to see if any trace of green betrayed recent use. There wasn't any. They inspected the clothes for traces of the sticky sap of banana trees. There weren't any. The police took the papers of the Praja Samity. Debu had forgotten them. From everyone else's house the police came out empty-handed.

Srihari had a warrant issued in Jatin's name also. He even suspected the detenu. The daroga ignored him. Anything might have happened if Srihari's friend, the jamadar, had come instead of the daroga. The daroga said, "Ghosh Mashay, there's a limit to everything. Don't exceed it."

"No, no, no," Srihari said quickly. "That's my mistake. You're right, of course."

There are people who think they can escape punishment for their wrong doing by making a great show of piety by which they hope to win the favour of the gods.

"Pandit," said the Sub-Inspector, "we are placing you under arrest. You are the President of the Praja Samity. We suspect that the Praja Samity is involved in this. Of course the inquiry is not yet complete. But we have to arrest you for the present. The charge is theft."

"Theft? Against me?"

"The S.D.O. will issue a summons in connection with the destruction of the garden," the daroga said with a smile. "Two iron grills belonging to Srihari are missing also."

"Are you going to send me up on a theft charge?" Debu was deeply hurt.

"Even Arjuna had to disguise himself as a eunuch when times were bad. You know that, Pandit. Don't get upset about it. It's getting late. Have your lunch."

"Won't you have something to eat, Daroga Babu?" Debu asked. He was strangely consoled by what the policeman had said.

"My job is the way I earn my living. Of course I'll eat with you; but not in your house or in Ghosh's house. I'll be pleased to accept whatever you offer me at Jatin Babu's."

The daroga went to Jatin's.

The village people were sitting around Jatin with their heads bowed. "Who could have done it?" they asked each other in consternation and surprise.

The women collected at Debu's. Some were sitting on the porch, others standing in the courtyard. Bilu seemed turned to stone. Tears were streaming down Durga's face. Ranga Didi's laments were loud and continuous. Padma sat beside Bilu. She was profoundly affected by Bilu's grief. She would have been only too glad to relieve her beloved friend by taking the whole thing upon herself. Her tears dropped on the ground from beneath her veil.

Uchinge appeared suddenly. Making his way through the crowd of people by butting his head cleverly into the spaces between them he went up to Ma Moni. "Come home, Ma Moni." He was out of breath. "Hurry."

Padma was his Ma Moni as well as Jatin's.

"Why?" Padma shook her head irritably. She thought Jatin must be asking for her. He must want tea.

"The daroga is taking Karmakar away."

Padma's heart gave a jump. She began to tremble. Aniruddha was being taken away? Everybody was startled.

"What's happened to him?" asked Debu as he rubbed oil into his hair.

"Karmakar asked the daroga to arrest him," Uchinge said, "and the daroga did so." The boy slipped through the crowd as expertly and as swiftly as he had come.

Padma controlled herself with an effort and made her way out "Blacksmith's wife!"

Padma looked around. It was Durga.

"Wait for me, I'll go with you."

Uchinge had not been able to describe all that had happened but he was not wrong. Aniruddha had appeared in the centre of the hushed crowd quite suddenly and confronted the daroga. With his chest spread and his eyes shining he had declared proudly, "I did it. I uprooted the garden and cut down the trees. The pandit knows nothing about it, Daroga Babu. Let him go. Arrest me if you have to arrest somebody."

The daroga and everybody else stared at him in amazement.

"I cut down the trees with my axe last night. I threw the iron grills into the pond."

It was true. Aniruddha had taken his revenge on Chiru Pal. The immediate excuse was Pal's cutting down of the tenants' trees. Wild with the fierce joy of vengeance Aniruddha had run through the darkness of the night. Nobody knew, not even Padma. She now slept separately with the children. Aniruddha had risen during the night without a sound and returned the same way. As he wrecked the garden he danced with excitement, reciting the mantra of sacrifice like a little boy '*Kha—jing jing jinak ji jing.*'

The sound of Chiru Pal's raging that morning filled him with profound satisfaction. The arrival of the police had not alarmed him in the least. He had effaced all traces of the night's work by plunging his axe into the fire early in the morning. Sticky banana sap had soiled his dhoti but he took it off and buried it in the mud under the water at the landing place. What had disturbed him was Debu's arrest. His heart shook. Debu had not been out of jail very long. Had they arrested him though he was innocent? Debu was the best man in the village, his childhood friend, his classmate! He helped everybody. The friend of everybody in trouble. Why did they arrest Debu? Why not Jaggan or Haren? Aniruddha sat among the crowd in angry sadness. Was Debu going to jail for what he, Aniruddha, had done? The crowd was sighing. Remorse tormented him. He could bear it no longer. Rising impetuously, he strode up to the daroga and confessed his guilt.

Debu clasped him to his bosom. "Don't worry, Ani Bhai," he said, "I'll do everything I can to set you free."

Aniruddha could not speak. He gazed into Debu's face, smiling from ear to ear. A deep happiness sparkled in his swimming eyes.

Padma was standing inside the house. Tears were streaming down her face. She was unable to speak. Durga was behind—a little apart. Uching and Gobra were clinging to Padma but they moved away when Aniruddha came into the room. "I'll be going," he said, gazing at each in turn, tearfully.

Padma had not finished her cooking. Neither had Jatin. Debu said, "Come home and lunch with me, Ani Bhai. Mine is ready."

Aniruddha left for the police station after lunching with Debu.

"There's a report against you," the daroga said to Durga. "Come to the police station."

Jatin did all the cooking that day, Uching and Gobra helping him, while Durga gave directions, standing at a respectful distance.

Padma sat quietly in the house for a while. Then she went to the landing place and began to utter shrill curses of the most terrible kind in the direction of a certain nameless person.

"He'll be killed, he will. He'll have a stroke. He will split open if he turns to stone. He'll melt if he turns to iron. Ill-Lakshmi will enter his house. Lakshmi will abandon him and dwell in the forest. His house will burn down, his bins turn to ashes."

More choice curses were revolving in her thoughts but she did not utter them. The pleading, distressed face of a fair, worn woman stopped her. Slowly she calmed down.

"Blacksmith's wife," Durga called, "Jatin Babu is waiting for you. Lunch is ready."

Padma did not answer.

"Aren't we going to have any lunch?" Uching asked crossly. "Why don't you get up?"

"Eat, you poor fools!" Padma said. "I'm not hungry."

"The detenu babu won't let us eat until you come. He hasn't eaten himself. Karmakar hasn't died. Why are you crying over him so much?"

"You imp!" Padma got up in anger to chase him away but she followed him into the house.

Aniruddha's case came up for trial on the 29th Chaitra. There was nothing to decide really. Aniruddha had made a voluntary confession not only to the police but to the magistrate as well.

He was certain to be convicted. Debu had been to the district town several times. The lawyers all said the same thing. The sentence would be from two to six months, depending on the magistrate's discretion.

The Inspector of Police himself had come to the village to find out whether there was any connection between the case and the Praja Samity. He told people plainly the conclusion he reached. The Praja Samity had not issued any directions in regard to the wrecking of the garden, but it would not have happened if there had been no Praja Samity in the village. He was sure of that.

There was a report against Durga, who had been asked to go to the police station. Durga knew who had made the report without being told. The Inspector looked at her keenly and said, "I'm told you're rather friendly with bad characters, that you—what's it all about? Can you tell me?"

Durga folded her hands and held them out to him beseechingly. She said, "It's true I'm a fallen woman. But how was I to know that Srihari Ghosh, the Jamadar Babu and the Union Board President—are bad characters?"

The Inspector scolded her. Durga was not intimidated. "Ask them to come here," she said. "Question them. I'll give the list. The Jamadar Babu came to Srihari's house only a few nights ago and sent for me. I went. That night I was bitten by a snake at Srihari's pond, the only reason I lived was that my time had not come. Bhupal the watchman and the upcountry constable Ram Kisan were there. Ask them."

The Inspector did not enlarge on the subject. He gave her a hard glance and said, "Go, then. Be careful."

Durga bowed to his feet with ostentatious respect and went out.

It was Padma who caused trouble. Her whimsical moods fluctuated, changing rapidly. Bewildered, Uching and Gobra spent most of their time away from home, hanging around the temple pavilion like a pair of young bulls. They followed the bhaktas around the village as they carried Siva's lingam, Ban Gosain, from house to house.

Elaborate preparations were being made for the Gajon this year. Srihari had postponed the construction of a temple and the building of an open hall but was taking pains with the Gajon. He knew efforts would be made to spoil his arrangements by Jaggan and Debu, Haren and the milk-sop who was the guest of the village, Jatin. He redoubled his efforts for that very reason. A fair would be held. Two troupes of story-tellers and reciters had been engaged. A troupe of jhumur dancers would give performances. There was to be a Poets' Tournament and a wide

variety of other entertainment was being provided. The people who had refused to thatch the pavilion free would be made to stand at the door like stray dogs, waiting in vain for admission. Crows and dogs collect wherever rice is scattered over the ground. Some of the people wandered forlornly round and round his house, trying to attract his attention, on the days he advanced loans of grain. Uncle Bhabesh had talked to a number of the recalcitrants. They were ready to admit their mistake and ask for pardon. They had promised to leave the Praja Samity. Srihari smiled to himself as he puffed at his water pipe. He was not going to pardon the Harijans. Did they want to take precedence over their masters? Weren't they dogs?

Aniruddha's case was to be tried the following day. Srihari would have to go to the district town. Padma was going to be alone while Aniruddha was in jail. She would need food and clothes. He would watch her. What would she do? Her wide eyes, spirited nature, tall, long body, her prattle! And Aniruddha's four bighas of fine land were up for auction. It might have been sold already! The Gajon started tomorrow but Srihari would not be present. Uncle Bhabesh and Harish Dada would have to take charge.

"Your mother wishes to speak to your honour!" Kalu Shekh salaamed.

Mother? Oh, yes, the Nil Shasti. Srihari rose and went into the house.

Women observe the Nil Shasti on the day before the Gajon, with vows and fasts; they perform rites, bless their children by anointing their foreheads with sandal paste. The rites assured the birth of a son like Nilmoni who was born on this day to Lilavati and Nil.

Padma observed all the Shastis. She was fasting. Uching and Gobra were not at home. Padma waited and waited. The boys were following the Gajon bhaktas as they went from village to village, carrying the charak pole from which they were later to swing to the accompaniment of drums. They also carried a plank studded with long spikes. One of the devotees was to lie down on it. An amazing feat! Was it easy? In the old days the flesh of the bhaktas had been pierced by arrows and hooks but this was no longer practised in the village.

At last Padma set out for the temple pavilion herself. Drums were beating there. Apparently the charak procession had returned.

A fair was being held around the pavilion and shops surrounded it. Sweet shops and fried food shops predominated. Small boys were buying papadums, brinjals in batter, balls of sliced onions mixed with batter which spluttered in large open pans of hot oil.

There were four shops selling general merchandise patronised mostly by young girls. They chose ribbons, laquer paint for their feet, perfumes. Three bracelet sellers were displaying their wares under a tree. Nelo was sitting under another tree, with terracotta dolls arrayed in front of him. How exquisite the old man dolls were! They nodded their white heads wisely as they puffed at the water pipes in their hands. Older people strolled slowly about. No work would be done these two days. The yoking of oxen is forbidden and so is ploughing. It is a time of rest and recreation.

Padma did not find Uching and Gobra. The charak procession had not returned. The drumming announcing the commencement of the Nil Shasti was at Srihari's house. Padma did not know that Srihari had engaged the services of ten drummers that year.

Patu had gone to drum in another village. Other drummers did the same, playing in villages other than their own, for cash. Almost all of them had lost their chakran lands. Satish Bauri had also taken his troupe to another village.

Padma came home, spread the end of her sari on the floor and lay down. These children gave her a lot of trouble! They were other people's children! She found them when she went out again some time later. They were covered with dust and their faces dry with hunger. "Look at them," she said, bringing them to Jatin, "see what a state they're in! Scold them."

Jatin smiled affectionately. He said nothing.

"Don't smile like that!" Padma cried. "That smile of yours burns me up. Come inside. Let me anoint all three of you."

After Padma had put a spot of sandalwood paste on their foreheads she said, "Tell Uching that if he runs around like this you won't keep him here. Tell him you'll turn him out. That you won't give him anything to eat. Gobra is a good boy but Uching is teaching him bad ways. They must not leave the house all day tomorrow."

"As you wish, Ma Moni." Jatin assumed an air of severity and scolded Uching. To Gobra he spoke more gently.

How could Uching and Gobra stay at home on the Gajon day? They slipped out early, as soon as the drums began to beat. Uching showed the way. He avoided the house carefully lest Padma detain them.

Special services followed the usual worship of Buro Siva. There was an animal sacrifice and after that, burnt offerings. A bhakta was to lie on the spikes the whole day. The plank had been set up in such a manner that it could revolve.

"You and I will fast today in the name of Siva," Uchingé said to Gobra.

"Fast?" Gobra was a hungry little fellow.

"Yes. Fast for Father Siva. Everybody does it. It's a sin not to. You'll get a lot of money if you do."

Gobra could not deny that it was the custom to fast for the sake of Buro Siva. Nearly everyone in the village observed the Gajon fast, from the lowest Bauri or Bayen to the highest Brahmin. Debu ate nothing before he set out for the district town to attend Aniruddha's trial. Even Srihari was fasting. But Gobra could not see how fasting brought a lot of money.

Uchingé realised Gobra was very reluctant to fast. "If you get very hungry," he said, "we can go to Chaudhury's orchard and pick some mangoes. They're quite big now. The Chaudhury won't mind and it will not be a sin."

Gobra's objections began to weaken.

"We can even beg for some food."

"Uhu. Ma Moni will punish us. She'll call us beggars and turn us out."

"Then let's go to Mahagram. There's lot more fun there. And Ma Moni won't know if we beg. Let's go."

Gobra was quite enthusiastic about the proposal.

The lame priest's horse was grazing on the bank of a pond on the outskirts of the village. "Catch the horse," Uchingé said, stopping.

"It'll kick."

"How can it? One of its hind legs is shorter than the other, isn't it? If it tries to kick it'll lose its balance and fall down. Catch it. We'll ride it to Mahagram. Take off your dhuti. I'll make a bridle with it."

The horse could not kick but it could bite. It raised its head, bared its teeth, and thrashed out at anything that came near it. Uchingé had to give up the idea of a ride on its back.

The evening services came to an end. The charak was over. The bhaktas had finished their flower games with fire. The animal sacrifice and the burnt offerings had been rendered up to the god. Bhabesh and Harish were sitting in the pavilion with sacred marks upon their foreheads. Srihari had not yet returned from the district town.

The drummers were displaying all their skill in a final thunderous outburst. The drums were large. Plumes of many colours bobbed above them. The sound was tremendous. Not a few declared they would be relieved when the drums stopped. But when the deft hands of a skilled drummer evoked rhythms

suited to the raga or ragini being played, the sky and air filled with rich, resonant music that echoed in the hearts of men. As they played the drummers revolved in a slow dance, waving flowers made from the black feathers of a crow's wing. On their heads they wore clusters of egret feathers.

"Chaudhury couldn't come this year," said Harish regretfully. "His seat is empty."

Chaudhury came every year and listened nodding his head in time to the music. He was an intelligent critic of a drummer's skill. He always brought a bundle which he kept beside him. When the playing was over he opened it and gave away prizes. An old shirt to one, an old dhuti to another, a shawl to a third. This year he was confined to bed. He had not been able to get up since he was struck over the head. The wound had not healed completely and he was running a slow temperature.

The crowds round the pavilion were at their densest. The lanes were full of people. Girls, boys, women, men, were walking about in small groups. There was a lot of noise. Kalu Shekh's voice rose over the turmoil. "Make way! Make way!"

He pushed people aside to make way for Srihari. Bhabesh and Harish went forward to greet him. Srihari smiled his toothless smile and said. "Good news. Two months' hard labour."

Debu Ghosh was also making his way through the crowd. He was pale and tired. He went to Jatin's.

Jatin, Debu, Jaggan and Haren were the only ones there that evening. They sat in silence. The problem was how to tell Padma. Who was to do it?

The chain on the inside door rattled. Padma was calling. Jatin went in. He was not greatly perturbed by Aniruddha's sentence. Two months' jail was a light enough punishment. If Aniruddha stayed steady and did not lose the courage with which he had come forward and confessed in order to save Debu, he would come back a new man. And if his mood proved to be as short-lived as a bubble, what was there to regret? The death of his disease-ridden and poverty-stricken humanity was inevitable. The trouble was with Padma. He did not understand how this uneducated village girl, so impulsive and affectionate, had gained such a hold over him. He could not repudiate her affection however much he rationalised the situation, nor could he belittle it by setting it against the background of a larger life and a higher purpose. Jatin had never taken a clay image for a divinity. He could not. Such an image dissolves as soon as water touches it, sinking swiftly into the slime at the bottom. The truth of that always made Jatin smile. But how had this fragile woman of

clay acquired qualities that were really divine? It seemed to him she was one who would remain unaffected by the waters of time. Was she not untaught and uncultured, emotionally immature, prejudiced, superstitious? What else was she but an image of clay?

Padma wept until her eyes were swollen. "Two months' jail?" she asked.

Who had told her? Jatin was surprised. How did she know? "Yes," he said, with bowed head.

"So be it," Padma sighed. "May he come safely home again! It is lucky for me the pandit did not have to pay the penalty for his crime, that he had the courage to tell the truth. If he hadn't done that he would have been condemned to live in hell till the end of time."

Jatin was astonished.

"The water's boiling. Make the tea yourself. I must see where the boys are. They're so naughty. They've not come home yet though they've had nothing to eat all day."

"You haven't had anything to eat either, Ma Moni," Jatin said. Padma had fasted the day before because of the Nil Shasti and again that day for the Gajon. "Eat something."

"I will. Let me find those two first."

Padma went out before Jatin could say anything more.

There had been little time to talk that day.

"How is Chaudhury, Doctor?" Jatin asked as he finished his tea.

Debu had forgotten to inquire about old Chaudhury for two days. Aniruddha's affairs had taken all his time and thought.

"A little better," Jaggan said, "but the wound has not healed entirely yet. There is a little pus and a slight temperature."

"I must go to see him."

"Let's go tomorrow morning. I'll go with you," said Debu.

"Pick me up on the way, will you? I have to go. We can all go together. Haren, will you come too?"

"Not tomorrow, Bhai. It's the first day of Baishakh. Ledgers have to be closed. I'll have to go to Alepur, to fetch four rupees from Icchu Shekh. You know what Brindavan's like. He won't give me another pice's worth of credit."

The first of Baishakh. The closing of accounts. Debu did not have many debts, but there was one bill pending at a shop in the town, eleven rupees ten annas, for things Durga had bought while Debu was away. He had forgotten it in his preoccupation with Aniruddha. And where was the money to come from? He had not given much thought to his own affairs since his return. What would the future be for him and his family if he didn't? If he were to die suddenly would Bilu be as helpless as Padma? Or even like Tarini's wife? The thought made him shudder.

Would his son grow up like Uching? No, no, no. That must not happen. Tomorrow was the first of Baishakh, the Bengali New Year's Day. He resolved to change his ways. No more. No more. He would attend to his own affairs. He had no right to take upon himself the burdens of others when he was so poor himself and had a wife and child of his own. God had not given him the right. The right was Srihari's. Srihari had paid all the expenses of the Gajon.

Debu stood up abruptly.

"What's the matter?" asked Jaggan.

"I've something urgent to see to."

On the way Debu entered the pavilion and bowed at Siva's shrine. "Greatest of the Gods," he prayed, "you have brought me safely through a difficult year. Bless me. May the new year also pass peacefully."

The lame priest blessed him with flowers from the altar.

Debu did not go home. He went to Durga's house instead. Since she had made the purchases from the shop on Bilu's behalf, he would send a rupee through her tomorrow and ask for a month's time. It was better to ask for more time than he would actually need. He would sell the linseed, wheat, and barley he had at home, and the potatoes, keeping only enough for their own needs. The first thing he'd do would be to clear his debt.

Durga's mother was sitting on the porch in the dark, cursing.

"She devil," she cried, "why don't you die! Your tummy'll take fire and burn you up, it will! You wicked creature! Straw before a flood! Why do you always have to be the first to go anywhere?"

"Where's Durga, Auntie?"

Bilu called her Auntie because they came from the same village. Debu did likewise.

The old woman drew her veil over her head. No pyre can burn hair a son-in-law has inadvertently seen.

"Don't mention her name to me!" she said. "Straw before a flood! Rupen Bayen is sick or something. She had to be the first to go."

Rupen Bayen? The kinless old man? Ah! The poor fellow had nobody in the world. But he didn't live here. He begged in Konkona.

"Has Rupen come back to Sivkalipur?" Debu asked.

"He's come back to die, Babu. He's come to set the village on fire. He came to the fair yesterday and ate some stale food this morning that the shopkeepers threw away when they heard the Sanitary Inspector was coming. This afternoon he came

down with cholera. Our fine Durga ran to see him as soon as she heard. Ha! How much she feels for everybody, my fine daughter! What can I say, Babu, what am I to say?"

Cholera! What a calamity!

The month of Baishakh was before them. There was not a drop of clean drinking water to be had. Cholera now!

He hurried to Rupen's house.

The shrunken old man was rolling back and forth on the ground of the courtyard. "Water! Water! Water!" his voice was nasal. There was nobody there but Durga. She was trying to pour water into a small pot from a safe distance. The old man had rolled quite far away from the pot and collapsed weakly. "Water! Water!" he wailed weakly, holding out a shaking arm. The look in his eyes was desperate.

Debu approached him, took up the water pot and, squatting beside his head, began to pour water into his mouth, little by little. To Durga he said, "Call the doctor. Quick. Tell him I'm here."

His thoughts turned to Jatin also. But he resisted the temptation to call him too. He was an outsider. It would not be right to drag him into dangerous things like this. This was their village, its troubles were their troubles. Guests are given only a share of the good things. How could Jatin be asked to come?

Chapter 26

THE New Year. Happy? The elders shuddered. The beginning was inauspicious. Death, in a most terrible guise, had entered the village. With him came his companion, Pestilence. In the temple pavilion people were studying the almanac and diligently counting the years.

Three people among the Bayens had been stricken during the night and two among the Bauris. Rupen had died. Srihari sat thinking. The responsibility was great; the village had to be saved. He would fail in his duty if he did not help the poor wretches in this emergency even though they had gone against him. Of course he had already begun to take the necessary

steps. Bhupal had been sent to ask the secretary of the Union Board to inform the Sanitary Inspector. Srihari sat wondering whether he should distribute rice among the afflicted. He had taken strong measures to protect the well at the temple pavilion from contamination and Kalu Shekh was guarding it.

Old Ranga Didi did not curse the gods that morning. Lifting her arms in ardent prayer she cried, "Save us, dear God! Have mercy upon us! Save us! Who else can the poor turn to but you? Infinite is your compassion! Save the village, Buro Siv! Heh, Baba! Heh, Bholanath! Heh, Mother Kali!"

Padma was wild with anxiety for the boys. They themselves were brave boys and unafraid. They could catch snakes. But how was she to save them from cholera? She shook with fear.

Jatin was worried too. He knew the statistics. He knew how many people die annually of cholera in Bengal, how many are half-starved. He did not believe in fate. He knew it was the fault of man, the result of his ignorance, helplessness, foolishness! The source of the disease was inside the country. It had not been thrust upon it from outside. All the world over the effects of man's wrongheadedness, factionalism, lack of knowledge, mistakes, are the same. Beggary as a business is a by-product of almsgiving. A by-product of the power to produce is the amassment of wealth by the greedy to the point of theft. He had read police reports of the way gangs of beggars force children to sit in earthen pots year in and year out in order to check their growth and induce deformation. These pitiable creatures are an asset to the beggars' trade. In India the death rate is higher than in other countries. People die like dogs and cats. Perhaps this country is more at fault than others. An effort was being made to remedy the situation. A day might come when—Jatin's eyes blazed up as brightly as the flame of a camphor lamp at an evening service! The next instant he sighed. He could not endure what he was being forced to witness, or dismiss it as a sacrifice on the altar of the times. He did not know how or when the village, like Padma, had so established itself in his affections that he was overcome with compassion. He grieved for it now, in its time of terror, like the closest of kin, as he would grieve for one of his own people.

The first day of Baishakh! Rain had fallen in the middle of Chaitra, a fortnight earlier. There had been none since. A hot wind blew up the dust stormily. It seemed to dry one's blood. The ground was burning hot. An intolerable dryness seemed

to be gasping for water. Not a soul was to be seen. People kept out of sight, cowering in their homes. Everybody had vanished in a few hours. Debu and Doctor Jaggan had gone out early in the morning and had not returned. Jatin had also gone out but he had not stayed long. Padma wept as she pleaded, "Do be careful! I beg you! Don't kill me!"

Jatin did not know what to say to this Ma Moni of his.

Debu had gone to cremate Rupen's body. He had been working like a hundred men from early morning. Jatin was amazed at his capacity to work and by his disinterested dedication to the welfare of others. Debu was, after all, a half-educated village boy. And he saw Doctor Jaggan in a new light. Punctilious and conscientious in the practice of his profession, Jaggan carried out his duties without the slightest slackening. Every single patient received the closest attention and the greatest concern. The fearless doctor made the best possible use of what knowledge he possessed. He never accepted a fee for his services in the village and he did not relax this rule even when an epidemic of this kind offered him the opportunity to make a fortune. Jaggan showed his greatness of heart. He had forgotten even to speak roughly. With words that were sweet and strong he strove to give people courage, dispel their fears and help them on the way to recovery.

Debu sent a telegram to the District Board which Durga carried to the town. Debu sent word to the Union Board. Patu carried the message. Debu went from house to house, caring for the sick. He helped those who wished to flee. Then he went to see to Rupen's cremation. There were only three able-bodied men among the Bayens. One of them had fled. The other two were willing but a corpse cannot be carried by only two men. The cremation ground was near the river bed, a distance of one or two miles. Debu thought for some time. He fetched his own cart and placed Rupen's body on it.

But Debu's duties did not end there. Patu and his companion were terrified at the prospect of having to carry out the cremation alone. The Bayens and Bauris are ignorant people without a strong sense of responsibility. Debu understood their fear and he realised they might just drop the body somewhere and come home. He would have to go with them to see that everything was done as it should be.

"Are you afraid, Patu?" he asked.

"Your honour?" Patu responded. His face had a shrivelled look.

"Are you feeling afraid?"

"A little," he admitted, like a frightened child.

"Then I'll go with you."

"You?"

"Yes, me."

Patu's face and that of his companion brightened. Patu said, "You can watch from the top of the embankment."

"Come on. I'm going to the cremation ground with you."

They set out in the terrible heat of a Baishakh noon. The fields were deserted. The cowherds, mostly Bauri or Bayen boys, too frightened to take the cows to pasture, sat huddled here and there in the village with their cows. What would happen if one of them was stricken suddenly in the open country? He would die of thirst, twisting and turning in dust that would envelop him like a flame. It was this that they feared. As far as the eye could see the countryside was devoid of life. The soil was dry. Not a trace of moisture was left from the storm. The large ponds which had irrigated the fields in the old days were silted up. The Mohana embankment had been breached in a way that allowed all the water that usually accumulated in it, drop by drop, to run out. It was dry. Not a drop of water was to be had between the village and the river. Dust was flying in the scorching noon wind. The cart advanced slowly. The creaking of its wheels was a long wail.

"Nothing can save us now, Pandit Mashay, we'll all die," Patu said.

"Are you crazy, Patu?" Debu spoke gently, affectionately. "What's there to be afraid of?"

"Cholera on the first day of the New Year! Afraid? People are saying Siva is angry with us for not thatching the pavilion," Patu forced a smile.

Debu sighed. He believed in the gods. But would any god do such a thing? How could a god take offence at what the unoffending did? What of those who had misappropriated the shrine's trust lands? Nothing was happening to them. "No, Patu," Debu spoke firmly, "you've done nothing to offend Father Siva."

"Then why had this happened, Pandit Mashay?"

Debu began to give a scientific explanation.

Uh! Who was this woman who was out in the noon heat? She was coming from the direction of the town. Yes! It was Durga! Durga was on her way home after sending the telegram.

Durga stopped when she saw Debu. "Why are you going with them?" she asked reproachfully.

"Have you sent the telegram, Durga? Are you on your way home?"

"Yes. But why are you here? Come away. Come away at once."

"Go on ahead. I'm coming."

"No. Come with me."

"Don't be silly, Durga. Go on. I'll be back soon."

Durga began to cry. The tears streamed from her eyes for no apparent reason. Debu and the others went on.

Debu had promised to be back soon but it was a long time before he could get away.

He washed himself as best he could in the muddy knee-deep water of the river before coming home. "Bilu!" he called.

"Daddy!" his son heard his father's call and came running, holding out his arms.

"No, no, don't touch me!" Debu retreated a few steps. "No."

The child thought his father was playing a game of hide-and-seek with him. He spread his arms and ran forward, laughing with delight. The child's gaiety affected Debu but he moved farther away and said, "No, Khokan. Stand over there." Then he called, "Bilu! Bilu! Bilu!"

Bilu came out, hurt and resentful. She stood silently in the door, saying nothing, awaiting her husband's orders. Did Debu want to ruin them? The heat was terrible. The pestilence worse. Was Debu making such a fuss over the sick in order to destroy her? She had spent the whole day crying. Durga had come to see her and warned, "Bilu Didi, the pandit needs to be held in check more. Be firmer with him. It'll not be good if he goes on like this, forgetting sleep and food. He'll harm himself."

Debu looked into her face and divined her state of mind.

"Is my Bilu Moni angry?" he laughed. "Take Khokan away quickly, Bilu."

The tears burst from Bilu's eyes. Her defences collapsed. "Don't cry! Shame! Don't cry!" Debu said. "Listen to me. Pick the baby up. And heat some water for me over a straw fire. I must wash in hot water. My clothes will have to be boiled."

Bilu could not utter a word. She took the baby into her arms. He began to cry. He had not seen his father since early in the morning. "I want Daddy! I want Daddy!" he wailed.

"Hush," Bilu slapped him on the back. "Hush! H-u-s-h!" But the child was so insistent she set him down.

Debu was losing his patience. He spoke sharply. "Ah, Bilu! What are you doing? Pick him up, pick him up quickly."

"Why?" Bilu was angry. "Don't I know how much you love the boy? What will you do, hit me?" Debu was astounded.

Bilu sobbed uncontrollably. "Kill me outright, will you? That's better than this—you're killing me by inches now. Bring me some poison, will you?"

Debu was about to answer her, to reassure her with love and tenderness but the words were not spoken. He jumped like a man bitten by a snake and shuddered. The boy had come up from behind his father and thrown his small arms around him. "I've caught you! I've caught you!" he laughed. "I've caught the naughty runaway!" Debu turned round, took hold of the child's arms firmly and cried in distress, "Bilu, bring some hot water quick, will you? Hot water! Quick! Khoka's arms must be washed. He may put his hands in his mouth any minute!"

Khoka thrashed his arms and legs in fury and screamed. He thought his father was pushing him away. Suddenly he threw himself forward and set his teeth in Debu's hand, drawing blood. Then he tore at Debu's clothes with his teeth.

Debu was terrified. He took Bilu by the arm and fairly dragged her into the house. "Bilu, do as I say," he said, "I'll explain everything. Heat some water as quick as you can. Wash out Khokan's mouth. Wash his face and hands."

Bilu's anger dissipated quickly. The sight of her son in his father's arms calmed her. "How cruel you are," she said, pouting prettily, "yet the boy loves you more than he does me. And you spend most of your time outside the house, away from him! You forget him! Shame! Don't you remember anything once you're out of the house?"

"I won't go again, Bilu. I won't. I promise. I swear I'll never neglect you again."

Debu took the child into his arms again after they had both had a good wash in hot water. When Bilu came up to them the boy pressed his face against his father's chest and clung to him.

"Look at him!" Bilu teased, laughing.

"No," Khokan said, "I no go. I no go Mother."

"Naughty!" Bilu laughed gaily. "No go Mother? Do you forget me as soon as Daddy comes? I won't give you your milk."

"Daddy, I go Mother," the baby wished to please her.

"Uhu. Hold on to Daddy. He may run away again," Bilu said.

Debu's breast was torn with the turbulence of his feelings.

"Aren't you feeling well?" Bilu asked anxiously. She noticed his emotion.

"I'm tired, very tired," Debu tried to smile.

"Shall I make a cup of tea?"

"Yes. Do."

Debu sat down. He was morose and silent. Conflicting emotions overwhelmed him. He seemed to be held in the grip of a terrible expectancy. He drank the tea. In the evening the wail

of women rose from the Bauri neighbourhood. Some one had died. Debu was restless as he put the child to sleep.

"Somebody must have died," Bilu said.

"I'm not going again," Debu said sharply.

Bilu looked into his face, surprised. Then she asked, "Have I said you should not inquire after anybody who is sick? That you should not help people in trouble? Did I protest when you used our ox cart to carry a corpse? But why did you go all the way to the cremation ground in this heat and on an empty stomach? You'd had nothing to eat. That is what I was angry about."

The boy had fallen asleep in Debu's arms. Bilu took him and put him in his bed. Then she said, "Go and have a look but come back soon. I know how much they rely on you."

Debu, obeying her mechanically, went out. A party of kirtan singers were performing in the pavilion. Drums dispel evil. They were preparing to make the rounds of the village.

Preparations were also being held to worship Dharma Dev in the Bauri neighbourhood. Debu called Satish. Satish touched Debu's feet. "It is terrible, Pandit Mashay, terrible. Two more cases this afternoon. Gona's wife just died."

"Cremate the body as quickly as possible."

"I'm doing that." Satish was silent for a moment. Then he said guiltily, "This morning you took Rupen's body. . . He's not a man of our caste. How could I go, tell me? You don't need to worry about any of us."

"Did the doctor come this afternoon?"

"Yes. And Ghosh sent to enquire. He'll give us rice. The doctor told us not to accept it. None of us went, Mashay."

Debu was absent-minded. A profound sadness was rising in his heart like a fog, spreading slowly through him, enveloping his feelings in a great emptiness. He could not bear such pain. It was choking him like the poison that turned Siva's throat blue.

"Pandit Mashay," Satish said.

"Are you saying something to me?"

"Yes." Satish looked at him in surprise. To whom else could he be speaking? Was anyone else called Pandit Mashay?

"What is it?"

"You won't be angry?"

"No, no, why should I?"

"Is there any harm in accepting rice from Ghosh if he's so keen on giving us some? All of us are poor. And at a time like this—"

"No, no, there's no harm in it at all, Satish," Debu's sympathy was warm. "Ghosh Mashay is not your enemy. He's offering it of his own accord. There's no harm in taking it."

"If everybody was like you, Pandit!" Satish touched his feet. "Explain to the doctor, will you? He'll be angry with us."

"All right. All right. I'll speak to him."

"The doctor is at the detenu's."

Debu did not feel like going to Jatin's. He returned home. Durga was there. "Did you go our way?" she asked. "It was Gona's wife who died, wasn't it?"

"Yes." He turned to Bilu, "Where's Khokan?"

"He's still asleep. He hasn't wakened once."

"Asleep?" Debu was relieved. Nearly four hours had passed. Khokan was sleeping peacefully. Sleep is a sign of health. "Where have you been, Durga?" he asked.

"At the junction."

"Eat something." Bilu brought him a plate of sweetmeats. Durga had settled his accounts at the shop and brought sweets home.

"There now! I failed to keep my word with the shopkeeper, Durga!"

"Don't worry about it. That's all settled," Durga smiled. "What have you to worry about with a wife like Bilu? She gave me two rupee. I gave them to the shop. You can pay part of the balance on the day of the Car Festival, in Ashar, and the rest in Aswin. The shopkeeper says it'll be all right."

Debu was deeply relieved. He smiled after a long time. "Bilu," he said, "I'm going to Jatin's for a minute. You don't mind, do you?"

"Going out again tonight? Eat something before you go."

"I'll be right back. I'm not hungry just now."

"You're good at fasting, I must say!" Bilu smiled. Debu went out.

The only people at Jatin's were the doctor, the opium addict, Godai, and Debu himself. Godai was attracted by the prospect of a free cup of tea. The artist Nelo was sitting in a corner, silent as always. He had come for money. He wanted to leave the village for a few days.

Jaggan was talking. "What's this all about?" he cried when he caught sight of Debu. "There's no sign of you this afternoon. Have you lost your nerve?"

Debu smiled.

"How are you, Debu Babu? I heard you went to the cremation ground. It was after four when you got back," Jatin said.

"I'm tired. Otherwise all right."

"You took the corpse of an untouchable to the cremation ground. You ought to hear the jokes that are being made in the pavilion!"

Debu ignored that. "Doctor," he said, "how long after exposure to cholera does it show itself?"

"Ho! Ho!" the doctor laughed, "you're scared, Debu Babu. You're scared."

"Of what?" asked Godai. "A little opium. That's the remedy."

Debu did not repeat his question. He was suddenly afraid to. Why add to his fears? Over and over again he said to himself, 'The scientific truth is not the only truth. There is a truth that is higher, greater, purer.' His dharma, his punya, all the good that he had ever done, would protect him. It would wrap Khokan in an ineffable and invisible mantle that would shield him from the pestilence.

"What's the matter, Debu Babu?" Jatin asked. "Why did you ask that question all of a sudden?"

"When I came home today," Debu said, "of course I washed myself in the river after touching Rupen's body. . . . Who is it? Durga?"

Durga was carrying a lantern.

"Yes," her voice was trembling, "Come home. Khokan's sick. He passed a watery—"

Debu sprang to his feet. "Doctor!" he called as he jumped down into the road.

Had the scientific truth strangled the truth of religious faith and appeared in his home in a terrible guise?

The fluids of the body are drained swiftly away by the fearful pestilence and the powers of life destroyed. Not Khokan alone, Khokan and Bilu, the child and his mother, both died of cholera. Khokan went the first day, Bilu the second. Debu was turned to stone. They had the best nursing and doctoring. The railway doctor had come from the junction town and the doctor of the Konkona hospital too. The Konkona doctor had hurried over of his own accord as soon as he heard the news. The railway doctor had been asked to come. Debu had nursed Khokan and Bilu devotedly, never leaving them, day and night, praying continuously. He had neither eaten nor slept. He had pledged sacrifices to the gods, made vows. Durga helped him as best she could. Patu had come twice a day, fetching this and that; Doctor Jaggan, Jatin, Satish, Godai had all done their utmost. Nothing had been of any avail. Debu looked on with dry eyes, in silence. He was unable to say a word. The blow hit him full in the chest.

The sun had risen when the fires of Bilu's pyre began to subside. Debu came home, bearing in his breast a life that was

empty, solitary, bitter. His tears had dried up. He had lost all feeling. He no longer smiled. He did not speak. His gaze was vacant, his heart unresponsive. He was as dry and dessicated as the Sahara from his lips to his chest. He stared listlessly in front of him as he leaned against the wall. Everything was still there—the road, the river, the house, the trees and the vegetation—but for Debu it had lost all meaning. Its existence was shadowy, blurred. The sky was pale and pain-stricken, the earth a dry, thirsty expanse. His future was lost in the colourless dust, effaced without trace.

The sympathy and grief of the villagers was genuine and deep. One by one they came but when they saw Debu they forgot the words they had prepared to say. Jatin could do nothing more than sit with him for a while in silence. Jatin was overcome with remorse for he felt that he had had a hand in guiding Debu down the way that had led to this catastrophe. Neither could Jaggan find anything to say. Srihari, Bhabesh and Harish came and stayed a while in silence. Srihari hesitated to speak in Debu's presence.

"Hari! Hari!" Bhabesh murmured.

"Doctor Babu," somebody called from the edge of the hushed group of people.

"What is it? Who is calling?"

"It's me, Gopesh. Please come."

"Why? What's the matter?"

Durga twisted her lips to one side and laughed harshly. "What can it be? Don't you know? Go and see."

Jaggan got up without a word. "Wait a minute. I'll go with you," Jatin said.

One by one the people went away, as silently as they had come. Debu sat on alone. He felt like crying his heart out but no tears came. He tried to lie down. He looked around him. Thousands of memories! There was the inky imprint of Khokan's hand on the wall. A trace of vermilion lay where Bilu had left it. Khokan's coloured wooden horse, broken flute, torn pictures! When he turned on his side something hard in the bed hurt him. He put his hand under the covers and felt for the hard object. He drew out Khokan's bracelets! With them were Bilu's iron bangle and one or two other small treasures. "Khokan!" he murmured with a sigh that tore at his ribs. "Bilu!"

"Debu." Someone had entered through the inner door.

"Who is it? Ranga Didi?"

The old woman broke into wild sobbing. Durga too was crying. She was sitting quietly in a corner.



When the night was deep, everybody asleep and the earth hushed, Debu hoped to be able to cry to his heart's content. He was not, of course, alone in the house. Many had come and gone but Doctor Jaggan, Haren Ghosal and Godai stayed the night. Srihari sent Bhupal, to sleep on Debu's porch. When they had all fallen asleep Debu rose. He came out into the courtyard and looked up into the sky. Khokan was no more. Bilu was no more. They were nowhere in all the world. Heaven was a lie. Hell was a lie. Sin was a lie. Virtue was a lie. What wrong had he done? In some former birth? Who could say?

Should he not go to Jatin? He had sought the opportunity to think of Khokan and Bilu in solitude but his pain was in no way eased. Self-disgust filled him. It was he who had brought the seeds of death into the house. It was he who had killed them. Was he not ashamed to cry?

Someone was approaching, light in hand. So late? There were several people, not only one.

Nyaratna, accompanied by Jatin, was standing in front of Debu. Behind him stood the bearer of the lantern.

"Pandit," he said.

"You! But I--"

"Let's go in."

"I'm unclean," Debu stammered. "I can't touch your feet."

Nyaratna laid a hand gently on Debu's head. "Unclean?" he asked. "Bring something out, Pandit. Let's sit here in the courtyard. Let us not disturb those who sleep." The breathing of the sleepers was loud. "I've come so late because I want to speak to you alone. I didn't feel like coming while there was a crowd here. Jatin joined me on the way. He is as wakeful as a penitent. He was gazing up into the sky like you were. I couldn't slip by him unnoticed. He told me he feels responsible for the tragedy that has come to you. His eyes were wet. So I brought him along. He will take part in our deliberations." Nyaratna smiled. His smile was neither happy nor sad. It was a strange, other-worldly smile.

Debu also smiled. His smile seemed a reflection of Nyaratna's.

"Please sit down," he said, bringing a cane stool out of the house.

"Sit down beside me," said Nyaratna. "Jatin Bhai, sit down." Jatin and Debu seated themselves at his feet.

"Bilu washed your feet the other day," Debu said. "Where is she now?"

"Debu Bhai," Nyaratna began. "I understood that day that you two were heading towards this. I knew it when I looked at you. And when I looked at your wife."

Debu and Jatin looked up at him in surprise.

"Do you remember the story I told you that day? I didn't tell you the whole of it. Let me finish it now. Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes," said Debu looking at him eagerly.
Nyaratna went on.

That Brahmin, by the strength of his dharma, was reinstated in his good fortune. Sons and daughters and daughters-in-law, grandchildren—grew like holy trees in his household. The fruit from his garden had a divine taste, the scent of his flowers rivalled that of sandalwood and aloe. No fruit dropped from its branch before its time, no flower withered. His world was replete with peace and joy and radiant happiness. Each of his sons acquired learning. Each of them was well-placed in his profession. One was the family priest of a raja, another was the skilled adviser of a court; others taught in famous schools.

The Brahmin lived quietly in his village, going about his work. One day his eye happened to fall on a fisherwoman's basket in the market place. He shuddered. In the basket lay a round black stone with curious markings on it. It was not an ordinary stone but a Narayan-sila, a stone sacred to Narayan. There it lay amidst all the unclean things in the fisherwoman's basket.

Approaching her, the Brahmin said, "Mother, where did you find this stone?" The woman smiled, bowed to his feet and answered, "I found it at the landing place beside the river. It weighs exactly one-fourth of a seer and I use it as a weight on my scales. Ever since the day I found it I have prospered."

It was true. The fisherwoman was covered with gold jewelry.

"Mother," said the Brahmin, "this is a holy stone. You are doing a great wrong in keeping it among unclean things."

The fisherwoman laughed aloud.

"Give it to me," the Brahmin said. "I'll pay you well for it—five rupees."

"No, Babu," she answered, "I will not sell it."

"Ten rupees."

"No, Babu Trakur. It will bring me many tens of rupees."

"Twenty rupees."

"No, Babu. I beg of you."

"Fifty rupees."

"No."

"One hundred."

"No, no."

"A thousand."

The fisherwoman stared at the Brahmin in amazement, unable to answer.

"I'll pay you five thousand rupees."

The fisherwoman could resist no longer. The Brahmin counted out five thousand rupees and taking the stone home, he placed it in a beautiful shrine. But on the third day he saw a handsome and haughty man in a dream, who asked him, "Why have you removed me from the basket of the fisherwoman? I was very happy there. Take me back at once."

The Brahmin was astonished.

The next day he dreamt the same dream again. The third time when the young man appeared to him, he was wrathful. "Take me back!" he cried, "disaster will overwhelm you if you don't!"

In the morning the Brahmin rose and related the dream to his wife. "Are you going to surrender Narayan because of a dream?" she asked. "Don't worry. Wait and see what happens."

Again that night he dreamt the same dream. Again and again. The Brahmin consulted his sons and sons-in-law, asking their advice. They all agreed with his wife.

That night when the young man appeared the Brahmin asked him, "Thakur, why do you come like this and try to upset me? You do not let me get any sleep. Have you not found an answer yet in what I do, what I say, what I think? I cannot let you remain among the unclean things in a fisherwoman's basket."

The next day the Brahmin's grandchildren gathered round him for his blessing as usual at the end of the daily service and he gave them sweets from the offering. The youngest grandchild tripped and fell. The Brahmin gathered him quickly into his arms but the child was already dead. Though women wailed, the Brahmin remained calm, smiling slightly.

That night the young god laughed cruelly and said, "Think what you're doing. There's still time. Remember the saying, 'the grandson of a doomed man is the first to die'."

The Brahmin smiled but said nothing.

An epidemic swept through the house, appearing suddenly from nowhere. One after another the members of his family died. The same dream recurred every night. The Brahmin smiled and said nothing.

At last, only the old Brahmin and his wife remained. All the others were gone.

Again the dream: "Reconsider. Your wife is still with you."

"You're a very insolent boy," answered the Brahmin. "You're giving me a lot of trouble."

The next day his wife died. Oddly enough, the Brahmin did not dream that night.

The Brahmin performed the funeral rites, put the sacred stone in a bag which he hung around his neck, and left the house. From one place of pilgrimage to another he wandered, crossing rivers and mountains and seas, travelling all over the country and even in foreign lands. When he sat down to pray he cleared a space, strew it with flowers, gathered fruit for the offering and received the blessings of his god.

At last the Brahmin reached the Manasa Sarabara, high in the Himalayas. He bathed and sat down to pray. He was sitting with his eyes closed when a divine fragrance filled the air around him and the rattle of a double-headed drum filled the heavens. Some one seemed to speak to him, saying. "Brahmin, I have come."

"Who are you?" asked the Brahmin without opening his eyes.

"Narayan."

"What are you like, tell me?"

"Why? I have four arms. The conch. The wheel—"

"Uhu. You may go. Please go."

"Why?"

"I haven't asked you to come, have I?"

"Whom do you want then?"

"That insolent boy. He appeared to me many times in my dreams and tried to frighten me. I want him."

"Brahmin, I have come." It was the boy's voice.

The Brahmin opened his eyes. Yes, it was the boy.

"Come with me," said the boy, smiling.

"I'm coming," the Brahmin answered. "Let me see how far you'll go." The young man drove him in a chariot to a splendid palace. "This is yours," he said.

The doors opened. Out of them came the smallest of his grandsons, the little fellow who had tripped and fallen. The others followed.

Nyaratna fell silent as he finished the story. Debu sighed deeply and forced a smile. Jatin did not smile. He was thinking of the strange Brahmin.

Nyaratna spoke again. "When I looked at you and Bilu the other day I remembered this story. Then when I heard you had gone to cremate Rupen's body, that you were nursing those stricken with cholera, it seemed to me you had stretched forth your hands to lift the sacred stone out of the fisherwoman's basket. Atma, Narayan. You are modern young men. Do not be offended if I compare the cholera-stricken bodies of Rupen and other untouchables to the unclean things in the fisherwoman's basket."

A few tears appeared in Debu's eyes. At last!

Nyaratna wiped them away with the corner of his shawl. Resting his hands on Debu's head once more he blessed him, sitting in silence for a long time. Then he rose. "I must go, Bhai. Your consolation is in your own heart. You will find it there. I enjoy reading the Bhagavad. It helped me the day my Shoshi died. That is why I have told you a story from it."

Jatin got up too. "If only these stories could be adapted to modern times!" he said on the way.

"Which part of the story seemed to you to be in need of adaptation?" asked Nyaratna.

"You won't take offence?"

"No, no, no. I'm glad to bow my head before the truth. Take offence?" Nyaratna laughed as frankly and as openly as a child.

"That fish basket. Those four arms, the conch, wheel..."

"The ways in which the deity is manifested are beyond all counting. You can give any shape you please to him. The Brahmin did not see the four-armed deity, did he? He saw only the insolent boy who appeared to him in his dream."

Jatin had reached the door of Aniruddha's house. As it was late, there was no opportunity for more talk. Nyaratna left.

A few lines from Tagore came to Jatin as he sat alone, thinking:

God, into this pitiless time,
Thou hast sent messengers,
time and time again, age on age.
They tell us to forgive, to love,
to erase all hate from our hearts.
Their words are not to be ignored,
For Thy messengers are venerable.
Yet, I have turned them away
in this, the time of my sorrow,
with an indifferent nod.

Chapter 27

Two months later. The cholera epidemic had abated. The monsoon was impending and the sky covered thickly with clouds. Farmers expected the rains to be early. When the weather at the end of Jaistha is as sultry as it had been that year, the rains usually come in the first week of Ashar. The Ambubachi is usually observed on the seventh of Ashar. If the monsoon breaks during this ceremony the earth grows especially fertile as the water soaks into the dry soil. And if, in addition, the flower placed on the head of the deity drops off, the time is regarded as most auspicious.

Wrestling matches in which the farmers take part are a feature of the Ambubachi celebrations. The most elaborate arrangements for these contests were made in Kusumpur and Alepur, both Mohammedan villages. Hindus and Muslims compete with equal enthusiasm. They tested their strength in this manner before the ploughing season began in earnest. Bharatpur was the largest centre for the bouts and it was there that skilled wrestlers gathered. The winner of the Bharatpur matches was acknowledged to be the best wrestler in the district and honoured as such. Ordinarily speaking, however, it was the Mohammedans who took a greater interest in the development of physical prowess.

Uching and Gobra had cleared a ring in front of Jatin's and spent the whole day there, embattled in bout after bout.

Debu was sitting by himself, gazing at the cloud-soft sky. He was observing the Ambubachi by refraining from cooked food. No food is cooked in most farmers' houses on this day. Some Brahmins and widows eat nothing that has come in contact with fire for three whole days. The clouds were heavy with rain. They rose, piled one above the other, turning and twisting, floating away beyond the distant horizon. New clouds appeared. The monsoon was imminent. The earth would grow moist and

soft, awash with innumerable streams of rain, promising abundance to come as it turned slowly into green. The anxieties of men would be dispelled. Debu thought of many things as he sat alone. The sudden disaster which had wrought such a terrible change in his life had wrought a change in him too. He was solitary, melancholy, tranquil. The people of the village loved him, respected him, but none of them could remain long in his company any more. They found his silence melancholy, his inaction stifling.

Late at night, Debu would sit for a while with Jatin, in whom he found a companion. Debu had a set of Bankim Chandra's works. Jatin gave him the works of Rabindranath Tagore, Saratchandra Chatterjee and of some contemporary young writers. His time passed happily enough. And often he sat by himself, doing nothing, gazing at the siuli tree across the road. *Arbor tristes!* Thousands of memories of Bilu centred round that tree! Bilu had loved the flowers. Often, in the early autumn, Debu and Bilu had risen early to gather the flowers that fell so softly to the ground.

Debu had been asked by the Muslim farmers to go to Alepur that afternoon, to be one of the five judges of the wrestling bouts. "Why me, Icchu Bhai?" Debu had smiled and asked. "Why don't you ask somebody else?"

"Is it possible?" Icchu had answered. "No one's decision but yours will be accepted in the five villages. They know you will judge fairly."

Debu was thinking about that. There had been a time when he had wanted the people of the villages round about to trust his judgement and accept his decisions. But what a price he had to pay for it!

Debu would have felt happier about going to Alepur if Jatin had been able to accompany him. He liked this young political prisoner very much indeed. Jatin complained now and then that the people of the country did not cultivate physical strength at all. Debu would have liked him to see the wrestling matches! There had been a time when everybody had cultivated physical fitness. The habit had not died out entirely. It survived, a relic of the past, like the temple pavilion.

The pavilion had not been thatched that year, though it would collapse during the rains as a result. The villagers had refused to thatch it without payment and Srihari had not lifted a finger. He wanted to tear it down for he planned to dedicate a temple on the site after the Durga Puja that year, on the thirteenth day of the moon, the Sarvasuddha day. And to add an open hall. The temple pavilion was now, in fact, Srihari's property. Srihari was the village zemindar for he had bought the zemindari of

Sivkalipur. The summer storm several months earlier had already defaced the unprotected walls of the pavilion. They were splashed with mud. The basudhara had spoken of a time long past, but the paintings were no longer visible.

Srihari sent for Debu often nowadays. "Come to see me, Uncle," he would say. "Bless my house with the dust of your feet." He was sincere, for he had a genuine respect for Debu. There was no sarcasm in the tone of his voice.

The possibility of another clash with Srihari was growing from day to day. The seed of it, sown long ago had sprouted and was flourishing vigorously. The Settlement had come again. The Panch Dhara court was to be held. Srihari was going to demand an increase in the revenue rates proportionate to the rise in the price of crops. Srihari had broached Debu on the subject. Debu had advised him to watch what other zemindars did in the country round. "Wait and see," he said, "do what others do. If other zemindars demand and get an increase in rates, you will too."

As a result of the Survey the zemindars had made a common cause out of the question. The tenants were worried. The more prominent among them had already begun to come to Debu secretly, to talk the matter over with him. Over and over again Debu had determined not to get involved in such conflicts any more, but people refused to listen to him. A rise in revenue rates meant higher land rent. That on top of everything else would be too much! Debu shuddered. He looked at the village. How dilapidated it was! How shabby! People did not have enough to satisfy even their minimum needs, to provide themselves with two sets of clothes a year and two handfuls of rice a day. They would die if rates were raised now. Srihari was a farmer's son. Had he forgotten? Now that he was a zemindar could he pretend to be ignorant of what would happen?

Debu had been living the life of an ascetic since he had lost both Bilu and Khokan but he knew what was happening. He could not forget nor could he stop thinking about it. For the last few days the situation that was developing had been the subject of his talks with Jatin.

What was he to do? If necessary he would have to bestir himself once more. Yet he often doubted the wisdom of intervening in others' quarrels. He remembered Nyaratna's story. He too, like the Brahmin, wished to dedicate his life to dharma, but it just did not seem possible. Jatin had interpreted the story in another way but Debu had not liked it. The thing that surprised him most of all, to his own dismay, was the way he was prevented from confining his activities to his own work.

Jaggan and Haren had already started rehearsing for the conflict. They were prepared to challenge Srihari. Haren walked up and down the roads, crying out loudly at intervals, "Call a strike! Call a strike! We're with you!" His shout was sudden and unexpected.

A strike or, as it is known in the village, a dharmaghat, is an ancient and honourable way of expressing dissatisfaction among Bengali farmers. Its antiquity is evidenced by its name. The traditional procedure is to place a ghat, a pot of holy water, before Dharma, call him to witness and make vows at the outset of any undertaking pertaining to the general welfare of the village community.

The villagers were already tremendously excited. By the strength of their united purpose they wished to make possible what was inherently impossible. Men are capable of sacrificing themselves with a smile in a strange way. The annals of every village tell the story of one or more ancestors who at one time or other lost all they had as the result of becoming the spokesmen of rebellious peasants during a dharmaghat. They left their descendants impoverished. In many villages ruined homesteads bear silent witness to the consequences of participation in a dharmaghat. Once prosperous homes lie empty and desolate. Some families left to seek a livelihood elsewhere. Illness wiped out others.

A dharmaghat is not a common occurrence. There are not many issues in which the welfare of the village as a whole is involved, and when one comes along leaders who can inspire the people are often lacking. A rise in the revenue rate was an issue that concerned the whole village. The tenants considered it unfair and did not want it. For generations they had worked on the land which had been turned into fertile and productive fields by their labour. Its produce belonged by right to them. The zemindar was insistent. Speculation was rife. Strangely, every ripple of the controversy impinged upon Debu.

One of them was the invitation from the Muslims of Alepur to act as one of the judges at the wrestling matches. After the bouts the subject of the revenue rates was to be discussed.

Another had come from Mahagram. The people had approached Nyaratna and he had sent them to Debu with a note in which he wrote, "Pandit, there is no solution for this problem in my shastras. You can, I think, find one. Think it over."

Debu bowed to Nyaratna in his heart, saying to himself, "Thakur, since you have sent this to me, I accept it." A strange smile lit his face. It was the same smile that had appeared on his face the day Nyaratna visited him. He was thinking. He would not involve himself in a cause that was unjust. If the

law sanctioned the enhanced rates the tenants would have to pay them. But the zemindars should be reasonable. They should not demand too great an increase. They should take the circumstances of the tenants into consideration.

People from six or seven villages were to come to Mahagram on the occasion of the Car Festival. An annual fair was held at Nyaratna's house and the family deity was taken out in procession. Nyaratna blessed all who came on that day. He had invited Debu. Debu decided to talk the matter over with everybody and try to reach a decision satisfactory to all parties at that time.

Uchinge ran, puffing like a train. "The detenu babu has sent for you." He paused only long enough to deliver the message. Then he whistled and steamed off again. Debu laughed.

Jatin spoke to Debu about Aniruddha. He ought to have come home by now. "He ought to have been released ten days ago. That's what the police say too."

"Yes, Ani Bhai should be home," Debu agreed. "That's so."

"I'm wondering whether there was any trouble in the jail, whether his sentence was extended. . . ."

It was not unlikely. Ani Bhai could not be trusted to keep his temper. And he was physically very strong. He might do anything. "Is his wife getting anxious?" asked Debu.

"Ma Moni? Debu Babu, she's a strange person. Don't you see the way those two boys cling to her? They go nowhere. Ma Moni is busy day and night doing things for them. She's asked for Aniruddha only once. She'll ask again when she remembers."

Debu's eyes filled. He remembered Bilu's smiling face as she held up her baby son.

"Durga has inquired about him two or three times," said Jatin.

"Durga keeps away from my house nowadays," said Debu wiping his eyes, "I asked her why one day. She said that if she were seen to come and go from my house slanderous reports about us would be circulated."

It was true. Durga did not go to Debu's house often. She sent her mother with his milk. Patu spent the nights at Debu's and did little chores for him. The arrangement was Durga's. Durga was changed. She was no longer a vivacious, lively girl. She had grown strangely quiet. Perhaps Debu's quietness affected her. Jatin's handsome manliness no longer disturbed her. Sometimes she looked at Debu from a distance. Then she would gaze around at the earth with the same melancholy listlessness.

Jatin spoke again after a brief silence, "I'm told Srihari has submitted a petition to the District Headquarters about me. He

thinks I am at the root of the tenants' dissatisfaction with the proposed increase in the rent rates and that I am instigating them to hold a dharmaghat. He thinks I should be removed. What worries me is this motherly soul—Ma Moni. You are my only hope. But it means a lot of trouble for you. She is a strange creature, Debu Babu. She has taken upon herself the care of those two boys. What will she eat? How will she manage? When I go away she'll lose the rent of ten rupees I pay. Her land is being sold. Felu Chaudhury of Akuliya has joined hands with Srihari. Arrears of rent—debts—it's a lot of money! The land cannot be saved. Ma Moni husks paddy nowadays and makes puffed rice to sell in Konkona. But can she earn enough that way to support herself and the two children?"

"The only place we can get any accurate news of Aniruddha is the jail," Debu said after a little thought. "I'll go tomorrow and make inquiries."

Debu did not return for two days. Jatin became more and more anxious. Nobody knew anything about Aniruddha. Padma knew nothing. Debu who had been making inquiries, returned on the third day. He had not been able to trace Aniruddha, who had been released from prison ten days earlier, on the expiry of his sentence. Aniruddha had spent the first day after his release in the District town, and on the second he had gone to the junction. From there he had left for an unknown destination, taking a woman with him. Debu had found out that Aniruddha intended to work in a mill or factory. He had been heard to say, "If I have to work in a mill or factory why should I work here? I'll work in a big mill. In Calcutta, Bombay, Delhi or Lahore. Wherever I get the best pay."

The chain rattled inside the house.

Jatin and Debu looked at each other. The chain rattled again. Jatin rose and went to Padma, standing guiltily before her with his head bowed.

"Has he gone away somewhere after release from jail?" Padma asked

"Yes."

"Calcutta, Bombay?"

"Yes."

Padma asked nothing more. She went back to her place and sat down, leaning against the wall. She said nothing. He had gone away, had he? Let him go! He knew best what he was doing!

Jatin was not surprised at the way she took the news. Gobra and Uchingé noticed her lassitude and snuggled up against her, crowding into her lap. Relieved, Jatin went back to Debu,

Four days later. The day of the Car Festival.

The monsoon had started the night before. The country was awash with the pouring rain. The rain did not bother the farmers. Their heads covered with hoods made of palm fronds, they set about their work with hearts full of hope. To hold the water in the fields they began reinforcing the ridges between them, blocking breaches. And they filled in the burrows of the moles. The ground beneath their feet was soft and buttery. A fresh wet smell rose to their nostrils. The fields were white with water, shining with the reflected light of the overcast sky. Clusters of paddy seedlings, still in their seed beds, made green patches here and there, bright and thick. The breeze stirred them. It was as if Lakshmi had descended from the clouds and, stepping softly, taken up her abode in earth's breast.

Jatin left his room and went out into the rain with the daroga. His luggage was on the heads of village watchmen. Debu, Jaggan, Haren and nearly everyone else in the village was there, standing in the rain. Jatin had guessed correctly. An order to remove him from the village had been passed and he was to be kept henceforth in a district town where the district authorities could keep him under direct surveillance. Padma, looking pale, was scanning by the door holding on to it. Today she had forgotten to veil her head. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. Beside her were Gobra and Uchingé, silent, sad, bewildered.

Jatin had been afraid Padma might create a scene. He feared one of her fits more than anything else. But Padma only cried, with Uchingé and Gobra sitting quietly beside her. Padma did not say a word to him. "Are you going away, Babu?" Uchingé asked.

"Yes, you must be very, very good to Ma Moni, Uchingé. You will, won't you? I'll write to ask how you all are."

"Won't you come back?" Uchingé wanted to know.

Jatin sighed as he shook his head. Then he said to Padma, "Ma Moni, I'll come to see you the day I am set free."

Padma was silent.

"Be careful! There's no one in the house to protect you now." Jatin said again.

Padma smiled despite her tears and raised a hand heavenward, looking up.

Jatin's eyes filled. "Whenever you need help go to the pandit," he said, controlling himself. "Do what he advises you to do."

"Yes," Padma's face brightened. "the pandit is here." She dried her eyes and said, "Take care of yourself." •

Nelo was standing in the crowd. Going forward he bowed silently and touched Jatin's feet. Then he went away as he had come, without a word. Jatin smiled at him.

"Good-bye, Bhai," Haren said, taking his hand.

"Be sure to let me know when you're released," said Jaggan.

Satish Bauri came up, bowed, and held out a dirty folded paper, smiling foolishly. "Our song," he said. "You wanted it written down. I wrote it down a long time ago. Now I've brought it to you."

Jatin took the paper and put it carefully into his pocket.

Strange! Durga was not there.

"Let's go, Jatin Babu," the daroga said.

"Let's go," Jatin stepped forward resolutely. Debu walked beside him. Jaggan, Haren and the others followed. Srihari Ghosh was standing beside the crumbling pavilion, the wooden framework of which workmen were dismantling. Srihari lifted a hand slightly in a brief farewell.

They came out into the open country, leaving the village behind them. "You should go back from here," said Jatin.

"I'll go as far as the embankment," said Debu. "From there I'll go to Mahagram. To Thakur Mashay. To the Car Festival."

Durga was standing under a tree on the bank of a lonely pond. Nobody noticed her. She stood and watched them, following them intently with her eyes.

They walked in silence. Pain seemed to have taken away their power of speech. Even the daroga said nothing. The sorrow of the others seemed to have affected him also.

Jatin was thinking of many things, little insignificant things. A change came over him as he gazed out into the fields. Once more the broad plain would fill with the young green of growing grain. The gold of autumn would flood over it again in a few months' time. Shining piles of golden grain would fill the houses of the farmers.

"And then? What would happen to the grain? Where would it go?"

He remembered Aniruddha's home. And the homes of many others. Dilapidated buildings, empty courtyards, drab hungry faces, epidemics, malaria, indebtedness, emaciated, half-naked children. Uchinga and Gobra—the future men of Bengal! The next instant he saw Padma anointing them with the mark of the Asoka Shashti!

Statistics lost their meaning. At best they were only half-true. A cruel accounting. The world cannot be understood by such methods. He remembered that Nyaratna had told him that one day. The world and some of the people in it are not amenable to statistics. Jatin bowed to him in his heart. Nyaratna was far larger than any figures, outside and beyond all accounting. And this young man beside him, Debu Ghosh. In the greatness of his heart this half-educated, farmer's son was irreducible to

any statistics. Jatin could not think of any mathematical formula that could assess the value of such men. It was a mystery.

These incalculables are what keep the world going. Once a comet approached so closely to the earth, mathematicians feared it would collide with it. Pages and pages of calculations were made and the possibility announced as a certainty. The calculations were not in error. It was the earth which, in response to some mysterious impulse, swung safely past the comet.

This village society, with all its ancient customs, had, as a matter of fact, already collapsed. All those who maintained the essential services of the village—the barber, the blacksmith, the carpenter, the weaver and the potter—had abandoned their ancestral calling and turned to other work. The bonds that held the village together had loosened. The clusters of villages also no longer held together as in the old days, in fives, tens, hundreds, thousands.

Mahagram, the Great Village, had lost its greatness. Only a few families remained in the eighteen neighbourhoods of which it had been composed. Nyaratna, ancient and worn, was counting out his days in solitude.

Across the river, at the junction station, a new and greater village was growing, a village born of modern times. Jatin knew the shape of things to come. He had seen it in the city of his birth, Calcutta. The thought of it made him tremble. Would the natural light of the earth be extinguished, its winds hushed, the whole of creation transformed into a hollow beggar woman, defiled by her foul profession? With desolation and decay in its heart would it smile falsely under an external glossiness? Afflicted creation! Dying by inches of a wasting disease! Death was certain, inevitable! Yet Jatin could not give up hope. Man is the elusive, mysterious element in every calculation. The earth itself was no more than a grain of sand on the shore of a great creation's sea, almost irrelevant among a welter of sand dunes, yet it bore within itself the mystery of life—life that was an exceptional phenomenon, for life does not exist on other planets or stars. A grain of life sustains and maintains, defying death—transcending it, flowing over, above and beyond it, in thousands, nay, millions of streams, all mingling in a mighty river that flows on and on through time. It would overcome all obstacles. With joyous and inexhaustible strength it would sweep away from its path all that tried to thwart its passage. Jatin did not doubt it that day. The country's power of life would flow freely once more.

Nyaratna was old and his time was passing. He would not be there much longer. But the memory of him—the ideal he had shown—would be born again. Jatin smiled as he remembered

Nyaratna's grandson, Bisvanath. His time would come too. And Debu Ghosh, Debu appeared to Jatin in a new light. Standing in the centre of decay and corruption, amidst the disorder and disunity of the village, Debu Ghosh had defied Srihari, the Konkona gentlemen, the red-eyed policemen. He had stopped the epidemic, had interposed his own body in front of the axe. When Jatin embraced Debu at the time of parting, he distinctly felt the fearless courage that animated him. In him lived the unconquerable urge to seek and find fulfilment, to overcome all obstacles.

Jatin trembled with excitement. His eyes shone with a fierce pleasure. He had his consolation. He had done his duty. He had assisted at the awakening of Debnath Ghosh even though he had been a prisoner in the village. His imprisonment had not obstructed or impaired the flow of his own awakening life either. This was the way men would have to live to survive the destructive forces of the age that was to come. There was nothing to fear. Nothing to fear.

Debu stopped on the top of the embankment. "Jatin Babu," he said, "I must go now. Namashkar."

"Namashkar, Debu Babu," Jatin answered. "Namashkar!" He took Debu's hands into his own and looked into his face. Suddenly he began to recite:

Whose is the voice I hear
on the road to the heights:
'There's nothing to fear! Nothing to fear!
For him who gives his life to the full
There is no death! There is no death!'

Jatin turned abruptly and walked rapidly away. Debu stared after him watching him go. Tears flowed down his face. How lonely his life was now that Bilu and Khokan were no more! Jaggan and Haren did not come as they used to or make as much noise. He felt cut off from the village. He was treated with deference and respect but people kept their distance. And now Jatin Babu too had gone. How was he to pass his days? For whom would he live? Where was he to find the object of his worship? Nyaratna's story came to mind. Raising his head and gazing into the sky, he lifted his arms like one who had forgotten himself and cried, "God!"

Jatin looked back from the bed of the river. Seeing Debu standing on the embankment with his arms raised and his face turned skywards, Jatin gazed at him fascinated. His satisfaction and joy was profound.

"Come, Jatin Babu," said the daroga.

Jatin stooped down to touch the ground on which he stood. He lifted a little dust to his head. Then he said, "Let's go."

The sound of a distant drum brought Debu to himself. He sighed. The drums had started beating in Mahagram. The Car Festival had begun. The deity must have taken his seat in the Car. It may even have started to move. Where would it stop? Who knew?

He hurried forward, directing his steps to Nyaratna's house.

BENGALI MONTHS

<i>Baishakh</i>	16th April to 15th May
<i>Jaistha</i>	16th May to 15th June
<i>Ashar</i>	16th June to 15th July
<i>Sravana</i>	16th July to 15th August
<i>Bhadra</i>	16th August to 15th September
<i>Aswin</i>	16th September to 15th October
<i>Karttik</i>	16th October to 15th November
<i>Agrahayan</i>	16th November to 15th December
<i>Paush</i>	16th December to 15th January
<i>Megh</i>	16th January to 15th February
<i>Falgun</i>	16th February to 15th March
<i>Chaitra</i>	16th March to 15th April

The English equivalents sometimes vary a day one way or another. Every Bengali month has exactly thirty days.

GLOSSARY

(Terms explained in the text are not included in this list)

<i>apsara</i>	celestial nymph
<i>asoka</i>	a flower
<i>auri bauri</i>	rope made from straw of the first grain harvested, used in sacred ceremony
<i>baba</i>	father; often used affectionately in addressing younger persons or children
<i>babu</i>	form of address for gentlemen
<i>Baidyanath</i>	name of Siva
<i>baikunta</i>	heaven
<i>bairagi</i>	ascetic
<i>bakhari</i>	a variety of rice
<i>basudhara</i>	five or seven streams of clarified butter poured on wall during religious ceremonies
<i>batasha</i>	small rounds of sugar candy
<i>Bauri</i>	low caste
<i>Bayen</i>	a low caste, usually of leather workers and drummers
<i>bhai</i>	brother
<i>bhakta</i>	devotee
<i>bigha</i>	two fifths of an acre; or 80 hands wide by 80 hands long
<i>bokul</i>	a flower
<i>brata</i>	religious rites observed by women
<i>chakran</i>	land given in lieu of wages
<i>champa</i>	a flower
<i>chandra bora</i>	large poisonous snake
<i>charak</i>	tree or pole from which tindus swing in honour of Siva on the last day of the month of Chaitra
<i>chholu</i>	chick peas, gram, vetch
<i>cottah</i>	one-fiftieth of an acre
<i>Council of Five</i>	panchayat or council of village elders

<i>dada</i>	elder brother; also a respectful form of address
<i>dali</i>	a gift presented to officials
<i>daon</i>	first handful of grain reaped
<i>daroga</i>	police sub-inspector
<i>detenu</i>	person kept in custody without trial
<i>devals</i>	a caste of priests and caretakers of Siva
<i>dhal</i>	lentils
<i>dharma</i>	right action; religious duty
<i>dharmaghat</i>	a ghat is a sacred pot of water placed before a deity. In this case the deity is Dharma, the deity of right action
<i>dhuti</i>	straight strip of cloth worn around the waist
<i>didi</i>	elder sister; also a respectful form of address
<i>Dom</i>	a low caste
<i>doyem</i>	land on which two crops are grown annually
<i>drongo</i>	a bird whose long forked tail forces it to hop on the ground
<i>gajon</i>	songs sung at the charak festival
<i>gandush</i>	water held in cupped hands for drinking; a Brahmin is said to have once drunk up the ocean in this manner
<i>gomasta</i>	rent-collector for a zemindar
<i>Govinda</i>	name of Krishna
<i>gur</i>	dark, unrefined sugar
<i>hakim</i>	magistrate
<i>Hanri</i>	a low caste
<i>Hari, Hara</i>	God
<i>Harijan</i>	literally "people of god"—a term coined by Gandhi to denote the untouchable castes
<i>hilsa</i>	a kind of fish which is much prized

<i>jamadar</i>	head constable
<i>jotedar</i>	small landowner
<i>kadama</i>	a round sweetmeat
<i>Kali Yug</i>	the Age of Iron, the present age
<i>Karna Sen</i>	a legendary hero whose fabulous generosity led him to grant any gift asked of him
<i>khash</i>	land directly under landowner or government
<i>kirtans</i>	sacred songs
<i>kisan</i>	hired peasant
<i>lathi</i>	stave
<i>maduli</i>	a small brass case containing a charm or spell
<i>mahasay</i>	a term of added respect—see mashay
<i>Mahavana</i>	descendent of Ravana, the demon king
<i>makardhwaj</i>	an ayurvedic medicine
<i>mal</i>	land of which the revenue is paid directly to the collectorate
<i>mandal</i>	a village leader
<i>mashay</i>	a term of respect—see mahasay
<i>maund</i>	a measure of weight
<i>mayura</i>	peacock
<i>mistry</i>	mechanic, handyman
<i>mokarari</i>	land the revenue rate for which is fixed permanently
<i>moong</i>	a kind of lentil
<i>morul</i>	a village leader
<i>moujah</i>	a unit of land
<i>Mug Rule</i>	a period in the history of Bengal during which anti-social elements went unchecked
<i>namashkar</i>	a greeting
<i>navanna</i>	the harvest festival at which the first rice of the new harvest is ceremoniously cooked and eaten

<i>paan</i>	betel leaf folded into a triangle and stuffed with spices
<i>panari</i>	water plant with small white flowers
<i>panch dhara</i>	rules relating to revenue assessment
<i>pandit</i>	a learned man
<i>papadum</i>	a relish
<i>parijat</i>	a flower
<i>patua</i>	image maker
<i>payesh</i>	sweet made of thickened milk
<i>peshkar</i>	clerk
<i>pranam</i>	greeting to superiors and elders
<i>punya</i>	religious merit
 <i>Radha, Radhakesto</i>	 Radha is the name of consort of the god Krishna. Invocation of both deities, separately and together, is common
<i>raga, ragini</i>	melody
 <i>Sadgop</i>	 caste of farmers
<i>Satya Yug</i>	Age of Truth
<i>seer</i>	a weight, a measure
<i>shasti</i>	goddess
<i>shastras</i>	Hindu scriptures
<i>Sudra</i>	one of the four main castes
<i>Swadeshi</i>	Indian in origin
 <i>tabiz</i>	 a magic charm
<i>tola</i>	shrine
<i>toofan</i>	hurricane
 <i>vakil</i>	 lawyer
<i>Vasishtha</i>	legendary sage
 <i>zemindar</i>	 landowner